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BY

MRS G. LINNÆUS BANKS,

AUTHOR OF "GOD'S PROVIDENCE HOUSE," "THE MANCHESTER MAN," "GLORY," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CHAPTER VI.

IN THE AMBER SATIN CHAIR.

WHEN poor Mrs Fleming instructed the vicar of St Mary's to enclose his appeal to her father in another to her aunt, she was as blind as Will Ashurst.

Mrs Norreys was an officer's widow, with two sons and a daughter, and a very small property apart from her pension to live upon, when her brother invited her to take charge of his household in Russell

Square, and of his own motherless girl, then seventeen.

His proposals were liberal. For her eldest son, Cecil, he purchased a lieutenancy in his dead father's regiment, and offered a seat in his own counting-house for the other—his namesake; for her daughter Clara, all the advantages enjoyed by his own child.

She seemed to expand with gratitude, as the recipient of his favours; and certainly the dignity with which she carried her inches, made people forget how few they were.

Her brother was not tall, but he too carried his head as if he had only to order and be obeyed; not offensively, but with a natural dignity which sat well upon him, and did not belie the benevolence of his countenance, set in a bush of light whisker and loose curls, into which silver threads were creeping.

As a business man, he had not his rival in the city. His sister was just as clever a business woman in the house. She vied

with the father in spoiling her niece, indulged her fancies and caprices, caressed her as affectionately as her daughter Clara, but she never let the reins of government out of her own hands for an instant.

From the first she had planned a nice little family union between her son Martin and her brother's daughter Margaret; it would consolidate business and property so compactly.

She meant no ill to her niece, she only loved her so well she desired to have her for her daughter.

It was a blow to her cherished plans when, in spite of covert opposition, Carl Fleming, one of the few sea captains who had a seat at the merchant's table, was allowed to marry Margaret Copeland.

Even then she had a hand in fettering the pair with a promise she knew would be soon broken. I will not say she had any wilful hand in the breaking, but it is certain her attempts to mollify the anger of the father only tended to irritate him the more.

She had, however, full credit for her goodwill.

And it is quite true that the young wife's loving letters to her father were destroyed or refused by him.

The affectionate aunt counselled patience, promised intervention, but her intervention was no more than a perpetual fan to keep his anger at white heat.

Still he never went the length of disinheriting his daughter in favour of any child of hers.

Yet Mrs Norreys lived in hopes. The business capabilities of her son Martin were leading to rapid advancement. The assiduities of Clara were rapidly filling up the void in the bereaved father's breast.

When lo! like a thunder-clap came the news that the *Euretta* had gone to pieces in the great storm, and every soul on board had perished.

What would Martin Copeland not have given then to have revoked his own words?

The intelligence came upon him on 'Change.

He staggered as if struck by a heavy hand, and would have fallen had not Martin Norreys been at his elbow to support him.

The livid hue which overcast his clear pinky skin was the talk of half the men on 'Change, and all sorts of rumours spread before the day was out.

"To Lloyd's," he whispered, hoarsely, with white lips; and, leaning heavily on his nephew's arm, they turned thither, only to have the statement confirmed.

Brandy and water were brought to him in the captains' room, and then a passing cab was called to bear him home to Russell Square, leaving Martin Norreys as his substitute on 'Change. He was a young substitute, but a shrewd one.

A ticket-porter was despatched to Finch Lane for the head clerk, with whom to take counsel and share responsibility.

The blow which had fallen on their principal had not paralysed them. One or two good strokes of business were done, and no blunders were made.

For three days Martin Copeland kept his room, invisible to all but Smiles, his old butler; and what he suffered in those days was known to none.

He blamed no one; he knew of no one to blame, except himself. If he had only forgiven his child, he would have been resigned. He had been a brute to destroy her filial letters—unanswered! He was punished, and must bear it, was all he was heard to say.

From the time his daughter had left him, the clerks had noticed a hard set about his mouth, a drawing in of the grey eyes. They only noticed when he went back to business that these signs were deepened, and his face less florid.

He commended his nephew and head clerk for their business tact and shrewdness; thanked them for their inquiries from shipowners and underwriters respecting the *Euretta* and those on board; and in appreciation of his modesty in consulting an older head, held out a prospect of early partnership to his sister's son.

Not all the decent—it may be remorseful—grief of Mrs Norreys at "the terrible fate of her beloved Margaret," could disguise her elation at the coming elevation of her son, and she could scarcely keep her satisfaction in the background.

She began to look higher for Clara than the Captain Bolan of the Guards she was so ready to encourage a week before; and to congratulate herself that a match had not been precipitated.

It is only right to observe that neither her son nor her daughter had any inkling of her plans or her schemes, and that so far she had not done any deliberate act to usurp Margaret Fleming's place for her own children. More than six weeks had gone by; the first gloss was gone from their mourning; the restraint of an interdicted topic, uppermost in the minds of all, had passed away. No one spoke of the lost ship or the lost lives.

Sitting at luncheon together in the massively but richly-furnished dining-room, Mrs Norreys began to wonder how soon

she might venture to lighten Clara's mourning and receive guests.

A footman in black entered and handed her a large letter on a silver salver. She took it, scanned the superscription, in a strange hand, and laid it calmly down by the side of her plate unread. "Some charity seeking a subscription," she concluded, as she went on with her meal and her chit-chat with Clara.

"If Miss Ainslie chooses to wear crape an absurd length of time for the major, that is her affair, she is no criterion for us. Besides, my dear, there is all the difference between a distinguished brother and a cousin discarded by her family—all the difference in the world."

"Is it true, mamma, that Miss Ainslie is left sole guardian of her nephew, that boy at Sandhurst?"

"Quite true. I only wish Paul Ainslie was ten years older, for he will be immensely rich, and a good catch for somebody, some day."

A light sigh told how Mrs Norreys

regretted the ten years' barrier between Clara and the "good catch" that was to be "some day for somebody."

The conversation was taking an unpleasant drift—Clara brought it back.

"I suppose, mamma, there can be no doubt that cousin Margaret was drowned?"

Mrs Norreys caught her breath.

"Doubt! Clara, what a suggestion! Did not your brother make every inquiry? Did not the two sailors say the boat was swamped? I am surprised at you!"

So saying, Mrs Norreys rose majestically. With the one hand she flung out the folds of her becraped silken skirt, the other closed on the unread letter with an involuntary grip, as she swept from the room, designing to read it at her ease by the drawing-room fire—such ease as Clara's uncomfortable suggestion had left her.

So faint was the Sandwich post-mark that it had been so far unseen. If it had would it have borne any significance?

The padded back of her amber satin lounge rose between herself and the couch

whereon Clara had thrown herself, with a book, as an excuse for thinking of Captain Bolan.

With careless indifference Mrs Norreys broke the seal, and let the enclosure drop idly on her lap. "Dear Madam," she began to read through her eyeglass, but ere she had scanned a second line her indifference was gone. The paper rattled in her hand, her lips contracted, a leaden hue overspread her countenance, she seemed to shrink upon her chair.

With that letter all her ambitious plans and projects seemed to shrivel and collapse. The dead had come to life. The father's heart had already been softened to receive his discarded daughter, she knew. What now would become of Clara's dowry, of the fortunes promised to her sons? No influence of hers would be wanted for Mrs Fleming, if once that enclosed letter reached Martin Copeland's hand.—But, need it?—What was to be done?

The voice of Clara broke the gasping stillness.

"From whom is your letter, mamma?"

No answer. The question was repeated.

"Oh, from a stranger. About someone who is ill," with a strained attempt at indifference, and a thankfulness for the screen of the chair-back.

"Someone ill! Who is it?"

"No one you know, my child," impatiently. "Only an old servant. Don't ask so many questions."

Clara subsided, wondering why the letter should have made her mamma so cross. But she did not see the enclosure slipped into the pocket of that mourning robe. Did not know what an awful contest between right and wrong was being fought in the gorgeous arena of that amber satin chair. Could not have divined what a terrible decision was precipitated by her idle question. Could not have dreamed how the interests of herself and brothers were being weighed in the balance against the unfortunate offspring of the sorrowing uncle to whom they all owed so much. Could not have dreamed the cruel wrong

that was being silently perpetrated, under the plea of maternal solicitude, when the odour of burnt paper filled the room; or what an aching head lay back on that satin chair when the irrevocable deed was done.

And scarcely had Mrs Norreys dreamed what a torment the postman's knock in the square would be to her for weeks and months to come, or what manœuvring would be hers to have the first sight of all letters brought.

But Satan is always ready with a hand to help his friends farther into the mire. Mrs Fleming's own pitiful letter to her father was delivered to Mrs Norreys, in the square, several paces from the Copeland door-steps.

"A letter like this would fall amongst us like a bomb-shell. I must stop it at any risk," she said to herself, as she paced her own room, in restless desperation. "But how?"

She had settled the question finally before the last dinner-bell rang, and every step she took as she descended the stairs

to meet her brother Martin told it. Oh that she had but had ears to hear what that decisive footfall said!

But it was not until months went by she ceased to listen for the postman's knock with fear and trepidation. And she never wholly recovered her composure. She began to be troubled with palpitation of the heart, which she ascribed to the shock she had received, leaving the interpretation to others.

And she no longer opposed Clara's marriage with Captain Bolan, contenting herself with the settlement of the bride's dowry upon herself; the dowry of many thousands, from the generous hands of the bereaved uncle, whose own daughter was stitching for a bare subsistence.

Almost immediately the firm became 'Copeland & Norreys,' and in less than a year Martin Norreys took another merchant's daughter to wife and settled in Kensington.

Very little persuasion was needed after this to induce the white-haired Mr Cope-

land to quit the home of so many sad memories and migrate to Kensington also. And then, when the Russell Square landmark was destroyed, Mrs Norreys breathed more freely.

If her conscience was not wholly at rest, her mind was. She moved in good society; her brother held her in honour. Her children were settled and well provided for.

To that, however, came after a time one demurrer. Cecil, still a lieutenant, grumbled in no measured terms at the "awful hardship of having to take orders from a lad like Paul Ainslie," when at nineteen the latter was gazetted "Captain by purchase,' over his head. Both their dead fathers had held rank in the same Hussar regiment, and Cecil could but remember how as a youth he had domineered over the little fellow Paul.

A hint from the clever mother brought Lieutenant Norreys to Kensington on leave, and it only needed a little judicious grumbling in the ever-accessible ear of Uncle Copeland, and another opening of

the well-filled purse, to place Cecil Norreys on a level with Captain Ainslie, alike in rank and in pocket, at least while Paul was a minor ; and Cecil was not one of those to whom extra length of service, and twelve additional years of age, would impart no sense of superiority or importance.

Cecil's captaincy and increased allowance filled up the measure of Mrs Norreys' self-approval.

As the years slipped away, so seemed to slip the burthen of her secret from her conscience. She took her brother's gradual withdrawal from business, the silvering of his hair, the stoop of his shoulders, as due to the advance of years, not of the pressure of her own slender white hand. And when at length his will was made, and its provisions openly discussed, she justified her own act—the act which kept her brother childless—in the good fortune it had brought her children, and her grandchildren, for they were rising up round her to call her—what ? Still, conscience was not wholly dead.

More than eleven years had gone by since the odour of burnt paper filling a wide drawing-room proclaimed a deed of treacherous cruelty; and save the one immediate appeal stifled with a five-pound note, not a sign had been made in protest. The nightmare of detection no longer haunted her pillow, but the odour of burnt paper ever brought back her fears—turned her ghastly white, set her gasping, and doctors failed to account for the symptoms.

And ready as she was to visit her friend Miss Ainslie, when the genial maiden lady spent the season in town, no inducement was strong enough to draw her to Ainslie Holt, the ancient and picturesque home of the family. It was a fine Tudor mansion, surrounded by grand old woods, where the axe was seldom heard, and within the house and without was all that might make a visit desirable. But it was situated within a few miles of Canterbury, and, to Mrs Norreys, all Kent was Sandwich. She dared not risk a meeting with the county people and clergy Miss Ainslie gathered

round her, lest the Rev. Austin Ughtred should be of the number, and her name bring recognition.

She could never leave her brother, and she took care that, when her brother sought change of air and scene, it was far away from the Eastern coast, as terrible to himself *almost* as to her.

She had ceased to fear, when, on the 5th of September 1852, her son Martin's son, Martin, was eight years old, and a juvenile party celebrated the birthday of the little heir of the great commercial house. A Shetland pony had been sent to the boy by his great-uncle Copeland, to supersede the wooden rocking-horse in the nursery; but the old gentleman declined to be present. He preferred to stay at home and sit alone thinking—thinking of the grandchild under the waves, whom he had never seen, and might have seen and cherished.

Mrs Norreys, the elder, that day had no thought of other grandchild than her own, for whom so proud a position was assured;

and in all the dignity of her rich black brocade and costly lace presided over the festivities well pleased, as any other well-preserved "good grandmother" might. All at once she sank into a chair and turned ghastly pale. The odour of *burnt paper* filled the air. Little Martin had thrown the paper wraps of his many presents behind the low fire, and set them ablaze. The festival was spoiled for her. Her daughter-in-law had brought aromatic vinegar and sal volatile. The unaccountable attack passed. She had recovered her composure, was following the joyous troop of youngsters into the tea-room, whither her son's wife had led the way; a footman arrested her progress with a subdued message from her son, who had come home from business and desired her immediate presence in the library. The man added that his "master looked ill."

What strange prescience was that which made her shiver as she swept across the lighted hall to meet her prosperous and well-beloved son?

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESULT OF AN EMBASSY.

SANDWICH may be small as a town, but it was too large to retain a special interest through a lapse of years in two individuals of so little importance as Mrs Fleming and Euretta, after the romance and excitement of their introduction had passed away.

Growth and the graveyard had obliterated the memory of the great storm, and, save to a few individuals, Mrs Fleming had ceased to be anything but a seamstress who had seen better days, and gave cheap lessons in music.

To say that she had become reconciled to her lot would be untrue; but she had accepted the unavoidable, and ceased to wail openly over her misfortunes (it may be, shamed into submission by sightless Will's cheerfulness), and had grown accustomed to the familiarity of people who fancied themselves her equals, and to the patronage of those who considered themselves her superiors.

Only three persons remembered what she had been, and treated her still with the respect and deference due to a lady; the couple with whom she lived, and the vicar of St Mary's.

Dr Manningham had been kind to her, had kept guard over the health of Euretta and herself, disclaiming all suggestion of fees; but the fussy little doctor bustled in and out with his silver snuff-box as if he had earned the right to do so; the vicar, fearful of intrusion on one powerless to resent, never went unless he had a good and sufficient reason, and his stay was always brief. Work and pupils had come to her chiefly

on his recommendation, but he did not presume on that account.

She, poor lady, who had a hungry craving for other topics of conversation than gathers and gussets, backstitching and featherstitching, crotchets and quavers, not only for herself but for her imperfectly-educated girl, counted these visits all too few and short, and whilst seated beating time for a pupil, or cutting out work in front of the window, frequently found herself glancing up Church Street, disappointed if she chanced to see the vicar coming along only to enter the church on the belfry side.

It so happened on that sultry day, late in August 1852, previously referred to, when Euretta had gone to Stonar House with parcels of completed work, that she looked up from the button-hole she was stitching, and it was with quite a little nervous flutter that she saw through the open window the advancing figure of the vicar, as with bent head and hands behind him he came down Church Street, and, passing the churchyard

gate, crossed the dusty road as if he had the cottage in view.

She heard voices at the door, and then the handle was turned, and, before her little flutter had subsided, he passed round the end of the screen (manufactured by the Ashursts with osiers and paper, in delicate recognition of her claim to privacy) accompanied by Euretta, whose flushed face bore signs of recent discomposure.

As the widow rose by the aid of her stick, and, with a smile on her yet pretty face, put forth her right hand to meet his extended palm, he watched her eye travel towards her daughter, and his salutation was followed by the remark,—

"I find Etta has been annoyed by the impertinence of two strangers, who, not content with staring her out of countenance, took advantage of a stoppage on the open bridge to make a sketch of her—at least so she fancies."

Mrs Fleming's colour rose, she sank on her chair grievously annoyed.

"Oh, Mr Ughtred, this is the misfortune

of poverty. Every Jackanapes thinks himself at liberty to insult a poor girl. Had Etta been attired as a lady, no one would have presumed to take such a liberty. I hope they did not venture to accost you?" this to Euretta.

"No, mamma. The housekeeper had given me a parcel of fresh work she wants in a hurry, and she had asked me if I would like to take a situation in Canterbury, and I was all in a hurry to tell you, when the bridge opened and I had to wait. I was thinking about you and the housekeeper's question, and saw nothing of them until the bridge righted, though they must have been there all the while. The one was busy with his pencil when I caught sight of them. I was off in an instant. They might see I was vexed;" and Euretta left the room to remove her bonnet, and tell her annoyance to her blind friend.

No sooner had she gone, than the vicar, who had noted the proposed "situation" for the girl, dilated on the desirability of leaving no stone unturned to open out a

better prospect for her future than that which necessity was almost forcing upon her.

"A little business of my own will take me to London at the close of next week, and if I could, at the same time, serve you by a call at Mr Copeland's, it would give me pleasure to lay your case personally before him, and, if he has any human feeling, move it in your behalf and that of his grandchild. If he could but see Etta, her youth and beauty might accomplish more than my words."

Mrs Fleming looked at him, with her hands all in a nervous quiver, her eyes dimmed with starting tears.

'Oh, sir, if you could only prevail on my father to pardon me, and receive my child, you would earn my deepest gratitude, but I fear he would not receive you. And I should scarcely forgive myself if your errand entailed any unpleasantness on yourself."

"Have no uneasiness on that account. We must not shirk our duty because it may be unpleasant. If time has not re-

moved Mr Copeland's obstinancy, it may have—" removed him, he was about to say, but he stopped short. "Well, we will hope for the best."

As the vicar left the place and Mrs Fleming, in a greater flutter than he had found her, he ran full butt against Mr Tilby, hurrying, all excitement, to tell the widow to "keep our Hetty indoors," because two Rooshian spies wanted to "bribe her" to go off with them. They had taken a picture of her, and wanted to make a fortune out of her. It was clear they meant to carry her off. How did he know they were Rooshian spies? Why, old Fogge had seen the one make pictures of the river and the quay, and he had heard them talk of Nicholas and Menschikoff, and ships of war, and fleets sailing up the river, and landing. It was clear as daylight, and if Mrs Fleming didn't want Hetty carried off to Rooshia by them furrin' spies, she had best keep the lass at home. Moreover, he said he had "seen the picture, and it was as like Hetty as two peas."

It was useless for the vicar to argue in defiance of Mr Tilby's eyes and ears. Rumours of spies taking surreptitious sketches of our harbours and fortifications were current at the time, and so far he was justified.

"I wish I had that picture of Euretta Fleming here," said the vicar to himself, as he stood in the rain on the narrow and muddy footway of Finch Lane, on the 5th of September, and raised one foot to the first stone step of the frowning edifice, marked by huge brass plates on either door-post as the mercantile quarters of "Copeland & Norreys." Did he expect the picture of youth and beauty to work a miracle there?

The inner door, set with plate-glass, and guarded with a network of polished brass, swung open lightly as he pushed, and he found himself confronted by a line of busy clerks at a long, high desk, also guarded along the top by a brazen network. Nods and winks were exchanged, and his quick ear caught the whisper, "Parson wanting a

donation for his church," as the young clerk he addressed answered,—

"Impossible to see Mr Copeland. He is not here, sir."

"When am I likely to meet with him if I call again?"

"Mr Copeland never sees strangers, sir. If you will leave your card and your business—"

"My business is with Mr Copeland, and is private."

"Maybe so, sir, but Mr Copeland sees *no* strangers. If you have called on behalf of any charity, our manager—or perhaps Mr Norreys might—"

"Oh, to be sure! you have a Mr Norreys in your firm! Can I see *him?* There is my card."

The clerk scanned the card and the clerical cut of the owner, and still hesitated.

"Will you please to take that card to your principal. He seems as inaccessible as the Grand Llama!" cried Mr Ughtred, in some irritation.

The clerk pricked his ears at the word

"Llama," and vanished. Llama was a cloth in the market, and had a mercantile sound.

Back he came presently.

"As you come about llamas, sir, Mr Norreys will see you."

With a smile at the misapprehension, the vicar followed the young man through the manager's room to a second, richly furnished with polished oak and crimson leather to match the Brussels carpet. Papers and bank-notes lay on the writing-table, before the occupant.

Mr Norreys, a well-built man, within a year or two of forty, rose, bowed, looked up, and waited to hear the other speak.

"Mr Norreys, I presume, and Mr Copeland's nephew."

The bow was repeated as an assent.

"My errand here, sir, will, I think, excuse this intrusion, and, I trust, obtain me an interview with Mr Copeland. I come as an ambassador from Mrs Fleming."

"Fleming? What Mrs Fleming?" was asked, in the perfectly natural tone of one who needed enlightenment.

The name was a common one, and how could a prosperous city man, immersed in business, be on the alert for the mention of a cousin over whom the waves of the ocean and of time had swept so long! She had been utterly dead to him and his for many years.

Astonishment sat on the brow of the good clergyman as he answered,—

"Need you ask? Mrs Carl Fleming, the widowed daughter of Mr Copeland."

"Are you dreaming, sir, or are you imposed upon? Mrs Carl Fleming was drowned nearly twelve years ago," replied Mr Norreys, with some stiffness and *hauteur*.

The vicar stood for a moment confounded by the cool assertion, made in evident good faith.

"Are you not aware, sir, that Mrs Fleming and her child were both providentially rescued, at the risk of a man's life, and carried into Sandwich Haven?"

Mr Norreys looked bewildered. "Be seated, sir," he said then, "this is news to

me. And, really, I am scarcely prepared to receive it. We had certain assurance of their fate; the boat was found keel uppermost—really, after all these years—" and he stopped.

"This is some sham clergyman come to extort money—or a benevolent noodle imposed on, I must be wary," ran the merchant's thoughts.

"Is the ignorance of this, Mr Norreys, real or assumed?" asked the vicar of his own discernment, as he drew himself up and said, "I do not understand your ignorance, sir, seeing that both Mr Copeland and Mrs Norreys were acquainted with Mrs Fleming's rescue by Kit Blean, the skipper of *The Lass of Kent*, and her whereabouts at the time."

The business man was schooled to keep his features under control, but here was something which caused him to stare blankly in his visitor's face, and drop into his own chair as he asked, sternly,—

"Have you any proofs?"

Yes, Austin Ughtred had proofs, and

laid them before him. The shipowners' letters first, and then—that which sent Martin Norreys' blood back to his heart—the curt, cruel, lying letter penned by his own mother in disregard of a good brother's secret agony, only to rise up after long years in condemnation before her own son.

Finch Lane is not a noisy thoroughfare. In the subdued murmur of the city was silence in which might have been heard the laboured breathing of a man, the faint rattle of well-saved paper.

The short letter took long to read. The man of unblemished integrity, the son of a British officer, the father of a growing son, sat as if paralysed, so narrow was the strait between two, so prompt and decisive must be his action.

The clear ring of his voice was gone when he asked, without looking up, "Has there been no communication since?"

"None. Your cousin" (how the merchant winced) "is not a woman of spirit, and she succumbed without further appeal.

She has eked out a poor subsistence by music lessons and needlework, almost a cripple for many years. A sad lot, sir, for one nursed in affluence. It is for the sake of her daughter, Euretta, a mostly lovely girl on the verge of womanhood, that she now breaks the seal of silence, and accredits me as ambassador to her father."

"It is useless, Mr Ughtred," said Mr Norreys decisively. "That letter" — it was folded with a sharp rustle as he spoke — "rises as a wall between Mr Copeland and his daughter. Its tone is conclusive, as conclusive as the fact that I myself, his partner, have been kept in the dark. In short, Mrs Fleming's name is never breathed in my uncle's presence. Of my own regret it is needless to speak. I cannot countervail Mr Copeland's injunctions. And I cannot comprehend Mrs Fleming's poverty. She had ten thousand pounds on her marriage. They cannot surely have gone to the bottom with the captain?"

"His books and papers did, and the

widow had, unfortunately, no knowledge how or where his money was invested."

"That was unfortunate and without remedy," said Mr Norreys, rising and glancing towards a black marble timepiece on the mantelshelf. He handed back the letters as an intimation that the interview must close.

The vicar also rose, with a sad consciousness of failure, and a vague impression that the man of marble face, bowing him out so icily, was not as stolid as he appeared.

Stolid! No sooner had the door closed upon the unwelcome visitor than Martin Norreys flung himself upon a chair, and buried his face in his arms upon the table-desk, in agony unspeakable.

Stolid! Was that man stolid who whilst his dear son's young guests kept high festival, confronted his mother in his own library, with such an ashen, tortured face, and answered her startled question, "What's the matter, Marty?" with so much bitterness?

"Ruin and infamy to all of us! And

your doing—*yours!* Oh! that I should live to say it of the mother I have loved and honoured!" And he paced the floor in the wildness of frenzy, as she stood there before him in her rich attire, aghast and speechless with her own fear.

"Mother," said he, with forced composure, catching her by the wrist and drawing her away from the door, "did you know that Margaret Fleming, the heiress to all these goodly things" (he cast his eyes around) "had been for nearly twelve years stitching, stitching for daily bread to keep life in herself and child—a poor cripple wailing 'the song of the shirt,' whilst we have battened on luxuries that should have been hers?"

"No, no, Marty; no, indeed, I did not," she interjected, in hurried trepidation.

"But you knew, madam, that she was *alive* and helpless, and dependent on the charity of strangers, when you sent her five pounds. *Five pounds* to mock her misery, and cut her off, O my God! from the father who was benumbed with

sorrow and remorse ; who would have given all his wealth to clasp her in his arms once more. Yes," he continued, with subdued vehemence, from which she shrank and recoiled, " the worthy clergyman, who has been the good Samaritan to the poor creature who fell among thieves, has laid your letter before me! Before *me*, on whom the news of Margaret's rescue fell like a thunderbolt! What was I to do, madam ? "

" You did not surely admit—" she half shrieked, falling on her knees at his feet.

" No, madam, to my eternal shame be it spoken. I spared my *mother*, at the cost of my own integrity ; my peace of mind ; my cousin's hopes ; her daughter's fate ; my uncle's happiness—but only for the time. The wrong must be righted, or I can never look my uncle, my wife, or my innocent children in the face again."

" Oh-h, Marty, Marty!" Mrs Norreys cried, in anguish, " your words cut like knives! Your fortune, Cecil's, Clara's, hung in the balance when temptation came upon

me suddenly, and I yielded. And then—then, there was no retreat."

And, still upon her knees, clinging as a suppliant to her son, regardless of rich brocade or costly lace, she told the story of the burnt letter, and all that followed of remorse and fear; but she strove to palliate her wrong-doing by her maternal devotion, and to warp his sense of justice to preserve her fair fame and the fortunes of the family.

"You will surely not destroy us all? Bring disgrace on my grey hairs, and ruin to your own children? Can you not help Margaret without an exposure? Do not be rash, Marty. I implore you, on my knees, to have pity on me. Your uncle would cast us all adrift in dishonour. Think of Cecil. Of your wife."

And so she argued and worked upon his feelings, until the man of unblemished name, swayed and tossed by conflicting shames and interests, consented to spare his mother and himself, at the cost of his own peace and honour.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE VICARAGE AND THE MILL.

IF St Mary's quaint old vicarage has not been the growth of successive generations, the long, low building must certainly have been constructed in those days when domestic architecture was original, if not occasionally eccentric; when there was no danger of mistaking your neighbour's dwelling for your own, and no judging its internal construction from the exterior. And it is probable that its cheerful frontage then was to the pleasant garden on the west, and that the bare, blank length of grey wall passed by our sad, weary, and

bespattered vicar on his way to his own door on the evening of his return from his unsuccessful errand to London, had been so left as a shield from the keen east winds as they came careering over the level flats from the sea.

Anyway, he put his foot on the step of his door, and after traversing a couple of square halls, parallel with the lane, leaving his hat and carpet-bag in the second, with just a glance at the fresh greenery visible through open doors and windows on his right, he entered the homely library, which also presented its dead wall to the lane. It was a long room, with the fireplace and a solitary window both on his right, and two sets of book-shelves sunk into the wall on his left, where windows might else have been; the lowest of these shelves being apparently devoted to ponderous folios.

He passed these, and made his way direct for a mahogany bookcase at the extreme end, which seemed designed to prop up the low ceiling with its raised

crest. Unlocking the escritoire beneath the ecclesiastical glass-doors, he drew from his pocket-book the letters handed back to him by Mr Norreys. For a moment he hesitated, and turned his head over his right shoulder towards the remote fireplace, as if he would have flung the useless papers to the flames. Fortunately his return was unexpected, and the fire unlit, though the evening was damp and chilly, so he only thrust the letters as they were into a small drawer, as if he would shut them out of sight; and, relocking the escritoire, threw himself into an old-fashioned, chintz-covered arm-chair, between the window and the square centre-table, wondering his housekeeper had not appeared.

He looked around. The room seemed in strange disorder; chairs were displaced, the table-cloth was awry, the window-seat littered, and—a key in a lock where no key should have been.

Half of one imposing row of seeming folios stood out boldly revealed as a door,

the concealed door of a small press which did duty as a cellarette.

"What, *again!*" he ejaculated, a look of mingled pain and displeasure contracting his benevolent features, as he touched a gong upon the table. A little handmaid answered the summons, and all in a flurry told him the housekeeper was on the dining-room sofa, in a fit of some sort.

He strode across the hall to the dining-room, an airy, well-lighted apartment, spreading farther out at the back, and odorous then with something that was not the perfume of the flower-garden. No second glance was needed to confirm his suspicions; the false key, the open press, the empty decanters had told what sort of a fit his housekeeper was in.

It was not the first time his wine and spirits had disappeared mysteriously; not the first time he had found her unfit for her duties; but it was his first discovery of the false key, the first time she had made so disgusting an exhibition of her degradation before her young assistant. She had been

forgiven more than once, on penitential promises, by the charitable man. He was not then in a forgiving mood; he felt her presence a stigma and a disgrace to the vicarage.

A month later Mrs Fleming was installed at the vicarage in her place, and yet not in her place, for she was a woman of neither education nor refinement, and her place had been the kitchen; Mrs Fleming was qualified to preside at his table and receive his few friends, an intelligent companion as well as a housekeeper. His solitariness was at an end. Her pinching and humiliation were of the past. Yet those years of stern necessity had taught her economy, fitted her to rule over the one domestic, and manage limited means—had almost dried the fretful fountain of her tears. There was no mistaking her position. She was a salaried dependant, but she was placed at the head of his small household, and treated with all the reserve and respect due to a gentlewoman.

It had come about quite naturally.

Austin Ughtred had gone most reluctantly, on the morning after his return, to dissipate all hope of her restoration to father and home.

He had expected nothing less than an outburst of tears and lamentations. Her tone of mournful resignation was new to him.

"Ah, sir," said she, "I knew it was hoping against hope. My father must be wofully changed to cherish his bitterness so long. Well, we know now we have only our own exertions to depend upon."

It appeared that Mrs Fleming was even then perplexed with two proposals for Euretta's services. Mrs Rye, of the Black Mill, had offered her a situation as nursery governess to her three youngest children; and a lady from Canterbury, visiting at Stonar House, had proposed (through the housekeeper) to engage her as young ladies'-maid.

The word "service" jarred terribly on Mrs Fleming's sensitive nerves, though Euretta, reared under widely different conditions, had no such feelings. Yet so long

as a thread of hope remained of regaining her birthright, neither proposal could be entertained.

That thread snapped, only a choice between the two offers remained; plain-sewing had proved so poor a dependence for two.

Many arguments determined the choice. The word "governess" soothed the poor lady's lingering pride. The comparative proximity of the mill allayed the mother's fear of separation; Mrs Rye was a favourite with Euretta, and no stranger; the miller and his family were of St Mary's congregation, and she need not quit the choir. Finally there was the clergyman's opinion that Euretta was too young and inexperienced to be sent out into the world, away from her natural guardian.

Euretta and Mrs Rye were content. Not so the housekeeper at Stonar, she was huffed, and declared that not another stitch of work should Mrs Fleming have from her.

The death of hope, the loss of her

daughter and of her chief customer all at once—for the old housekeeper represented the family patronage—put the widow into great tribulation.

This came to the ears of the vicar, through a casual word of solicitude and sympathy from blind Will, after choir-practice one evening at the vicarage.

The vicar pondered. At length—

"I am losing my old housekeeper, Mr Ashurst. Do you think Mrs Fleming would be willing to accept the post?"

"Ay, right-down glad I'm sure, sir. I believe she worships the very ground you tread on, and she's in sad straits now."

A faint smile flickered on the vicar's face. The smile was lost on Will, but not the sigh which prefaced his grave reply, "I do not seek a worshipper, I only want a faithful comptroller of household matters under this roof."

"Ay, ay, sir, I understand. But, heart-service is better than eye-service, I take it. I meant no harm."

So it came about that the basket-maker

and his wife lost their lodger, and Austin Ughtred saw his mother's work-table back in the vicarage.

It was a serene haven to the doubly shipwrecked woman, and as days and months went by, peace smoothed away the lines pinched in her face by the sharp fingers of struggling necessity.

As for Austin Ughtred, well, he soon learned the wide difference between heart-service and eye-service.

Euretta, who had long dreamed of a future when she, by her own endeavours, might relieve her mother's weight of care and toil, was inwardly delighted at the change; though, not being demonstrative, she said little beyond a few words of thankfulness in the ears of her blind friend.

She said less of satisfaction at her own change; though in many respects it was better for her than she knew. Mrs Rye was a fresh, cheery woman, always looking on the bright side of things; there could be neither moping nor melancholy in her presence. The miller, too, was hearty and

genial, and so were his two stout sons who worked in the mill with him, and thought it good fun to tease "Hetty" whenever she came in their way. Two girls were away at school, but "Hetty" found the three lively little romps in her charge quite as much as she could manage. She had been doubtful of her own competence to instruct the eldest, aged eight, but she speedily discovered that she was more of a nursemaid than a "governess," and that lessons were the least part of her duty. Active and energetic Mrs Rye, bustling about with her one plump maid-servant, with poultry and pigs to feed, and a cow to milk, seemed to think the hours devoted to books so much time wasted. There was no room set apart for study, and no sooner had Euretta grouped the three around her in a corner of the big kitchen, and secured their attention, than there was a call for "Hetty" to go somewhere, or do something, quite incompatible with teaching.

It counteracted the girl's somewhat morbid tendency to sit and dream, if it did not

advance her pupils, and was a healthy reaction, if not altogether what she had expected. In any case, both mind and body were invigorated with the change. Exercise, abundant and good food, fresh air and plenty of it, all did their strengthening work.

Yet there were times during the winter when so much of that same "fresh air" came with a rush and a roar over the wide expanse of meadow, marsh and river, to tear at the sails of the tall, black mill, and batter at the windows of the square, red house beside it, as filled her with shuddering remembrances of a child's terror, and made her wish for calmer quarters, or at least to escape the laughter of young Reuben and Dan at her white-faced fear.

There was, however, not much danger of her running away from the jests and banter of the young men, so long as the miller and his wife treated her with so much homely kindness, and the children returned her attachment so heartily—or, while the really good pianoforte in the best

parlour was free to her fingers, and she was granted leisure to practise day by day, on the sole proviso that she taught "Nelly her notes"—or while the good miller, smoking his pipe by the fire on the long winter evenings after the children were put to bed, asked her to sing and play for him as if she had been one of the family, and seemed to listen with pleasure—or while she was permitted to go to the vicarage week by week for choir practice, and Will Ashurst, to whom the dark or the light were as one, and for whom the wild road had no pitfalls, invariably went as her protector homewards.

There had been one drawback to Euretta's content; a great one to any girl of her age, with any claim to respectability—her appearance. Mrs Tilby had long ceased to supply her with bonnets and frocks. (She had worn her own last garment, and shared the narrow bed of her lost little one three or four years). Mrs Fleming's slender means had not kept pace with the girl's growth. She

had a general consciousness of shabbiness when she went to church on a Sunday in a faded coburg, all the more oppressive from contrast to the over-trimmed satins and merinos of the Ryes.

Her own earnings had not done much to remedy the deficiency, and the half-worn green merino gown Mrs Rye had offered "Hetty" for translation before Christmas was but a poor substitute for a new one.

When lo! as if by the touch of a fairy wand, Cinderella was arrayed from head to foot.

In Christmas week the postman brought a letter for "Mrs Carl Fleming!" The first in all the years she had spent in Sandwich.

A letter did I say? Nay—a note! a £20 Bank of England note, folded in a blank sheet of paper, with nothing but the address on the envelope and the London postmark as a clue to the sender!

"Mrs Carl Fleming, Sandwich, Kent,"

was all the address, and the handwriting was unknown.

Conjecture exhausted itself on the compunction of a trio—her father, her aunt, her cousin.

Was it for her ?

The postmaster assured her there was no second Mrs Carl Fleming in Sandwich.

Should she use it ?

"Ay," said the vicar, "it is clearly your own. Whether sent in compunction, or compassion, or restitution, it is yours."

Plain and inexpensive was the new attire of both mother and daughter, but it was new, and seemed to impart a something that had been wanting of self-respect and self-command. That it gave freshness to the face of the mother and set off the youthful charms of the daughter goes without telling.

It inspired the latter with sufficient quiet firmness to secure a defined time and place for lessons.

And either that or something else seemed to inspire the miller's sons with an idea

that Hetty might prefer a younger escort than blind Will on her way from choir-practice.

But "Hetty" clung to her old friend, and either did not or would not see their drift, although she remarked to him that "Colin and Dan were more civil than they used to be."

About her sixteenth birthday, in February, another bank-note came as mysteriously, again in April, again in June, in September, and so on every two or three months, whilst the year wore gradually away, and the next took up the round, brightening Mrs Fleming's fair face with hope and expectancy. Years seemed to have dropped from her in the months she had spent under the vicarage roof, and since that first bit of crisp bank-paper filled her eyes with wonder and tears of joy.

The years that had slipped from the mother might have fallen on the daughter. Not that in growing taller and older she had grown less beautiful or graceful, but that a singular reserve and retiring dignity

of manner seemed to invest her as with a mantle, and her natural stability of character to become more pronounced. It was remarkable, inasmuch as it came upon her suddenly, and not by gradual development.

"What makes you so sober this morning, Hetty? You have scarcely spoken a word all breakfast time. It is not any of Colin or Dan's nonsense, is it?" asked Mrs Rye, as she folded the table-cloth, and noted the girl's abstraction whilst gathering her pupils around her one sunny summer day, when the perfume of roses, mignonette, and fresh hay came in through the open windows and doors.

"Oh, no; I've had a curious dream, that is all."

"All? And quite enough if it's to last all day. You might be dreaming now. Give yourself a shake, and waken up, my dear. There's no heed to be given to dreams," said Mrs Rye, with hearty good nature, and without evincing any curiosity respecting the nature of the dream.

And Euretta was not voluntarily communicative.

"Have you been dreaming again, my dear?" asked Mrs Rye quizzically, a few days later.

"Yes," was the sole response.

The querist noted a faint flush on Euretta's cheek, but whether at her own unsympathetic "Umph!" or at the dream, she had no skill to determine.

Some time after that, like symptoms caused Mrs Rye to say,—

"Dreaming again, Hetty?"

"Yes; and always the same dream," and there was no mistake now about the flush upon the cheek.

"Then I tell you what, you had best take a dose of herb-tea, or go and talk to Dr Manningham. When people dream by day, and dream by night, and always the same dream, it's a sign they want physic. Unless—" and she looked intently at the girl, "unless when lasses have begun sweethearting. Perhaps you have a sweetheart?"

"Oh, no," said Euretta calmly.

"Mayhap our Colin or our Dan—" put the mother apprehensively.

"Oh dear, no!"

And so conclusive was the "Oh dear, no," that Mrs Rye could only move away, muttering to herself,—

"She might do worse, and so might they. I wonder what the lass does dream about."

But she never again asked the question, and was never told.

Whatever it was, it exercised a potent influence on the mind of the ripening woman; changed the tenor of her life, and was, maybe, answerable at an after date, for a convulsion in the family of the Ryes.

Her teaching had all along been a labour of love—she was learning as well as teaching; and when lessons were over she had been ready for a romp in the meadows with the children, as if only an elder child. But now she had always a book in her pocket, or in the little fancy basket Will Ashurst had made for her,

and read assiduously whilst they disported themselves. The books came from the well-selected library of the good vicar, and were pored over in the early morning, before even that early-rising family were astir. Then she volunteered to read *The Kentish Gazette* aloud to the miller whilst he smoked his pipe, and, as she read the momentous news of the time, others clustered round to listen, and the two young men watched her expressive countenance with an interest not altogether brotherly.

Dan, a corporal in the Kentish militia, a good-humoured, frolicsome fellow, with deeper feelings than anyone gave him credit for, did not cease to plague and banter her, hide her books, or laugh at her studious fit, or upset her work-basket (another of the blind man's gifts), run down the stitches of her crochet, or pick the labels off her cotton-reels; but he no longer did so without a sharp rebuke from Colin, the grave and steady one of the family, not always taken in good part;

and she must have been blind not to perceive that whithersoever she went, with her pupils or without, one or other of the young men was sure to cross her path, or to follow her and linger.

Had she been a coquette, nothing would have pleased her better; as it was, she felt more annoyance than gratification, and it was anything but a pleasure to her to find their eyes turned towards the low gallery of the choir on a Sunday instead of towards the pulpit. She was afraid it would attract the attention of others, and be sure to irritate the miller and his wife if they were to notice; yet, situated as she was, she had no means of escape. The young men seemed to think that long acquaintance and her position under their father's roof formed a ground for closer association than she was disposed to permit, and each in his own way resented her attitude of persistent reserve.

All this made her uncomfortable, although, unwilling to disturb her mother, she kept her growing disquiet to herself.

One day, passing close to the mill, she accidently overheard, through the open upper door, the angry voices of Colin and Dan in loud altercation, each accusing the other of seeking her favour by underhand means, and of prejudicing her against himself.

"I cannot stand this," she said to herself, as she hurried on her errand; "it will never do for me to remain here and sow dissension between too good brothers. It would be making a very poor return for all the kindness of Mr and Mrs Rye. If they would only be content to treat me as they did when first I came, it would be all right; but I am not inclined to be whispered to by Colin, or to be kissed by Dan, and what they call 'pride,' my mother would call 'propriety.' They are both good-looking young men and well enough in their way —but—a—well I don't think I am destined to spend my life in a mill; and it's no fault of mine if I cannot fall in love with either of them. But it would be a fault to stay here now I know they are quarrelling about

me, seeing that I could never marry either of them. Perhaps I have already stayed too long, for my own sake as well as theirs. Mother seemed quite distressed last Sunday when she said that I was losing my little refinement, through associating only with under-bred people. I wonder if she was right in thinking that my tone of voice was altering. And, oh, I wonder if Dr Manningham could recommend me to a higher-class family? or the vicar? But higher-class people require higher-class qualifications; and will very likely look down upon me. Well, I cannot expect to be treated as I am at the mill. I shall be loth to leave them all, it has been like a home to me, but—there is no help for it —I must go."

And so she cogitated as she went her way along the brown road and over the Delf-bridge and past the old Grammar-school into the town, with a very sober face that flushed and paled with varying emotions, her lustrous, dark-grey eyes

more than once dim with moisture, though it never rounded to a tear.

Yet she never wavered, and her purpose grew and strengthened with every step she took. She had a definite end in view had the seventeen years' girl, though the secret lay hidden in her own young breast; the question uppermost in her mind was how to attain it, as, indeed, it had been for many months.

A tiny ball came rolling to her feet that very day as if by chance. She took it up without hesitation, little wotting what momentous issues lay coiled within its sphere.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DAY DREAMER.

"HETTY!" cried Nelly, running to meet her with outstretched arms as she approached the mill on her return about noon, "Hetty, mother says we may go to the Castle blackberrying, this afternoon, if you will promise to keep us out of danger. You will, won't you?"

Nelly's younger sisters close at her heels pointed the *we*, as they clustered round "Hetty" in high glee at the anticipated holiday.

Euretta gave the desired promise readily, but conditional on obedience and

good behaviour, and the assent of the farmer who occupied the land.

"Oh, Farmer Broadley has cut his wheat, and father says he won't mind," said Nelly, and that was supposed to settle the matter.

Richborough Castle was not more than a quarter of a mile away from the Black Mill on the north-east, and the wheat which had been cut and carried had grown upon the high cliff within the wide quadrangle enclosed on three sides by the ruined walls of King Ethelbert's palace, walls so strongly built by Roman and Saxon hands as to defy Time, had not the ruthless torch and mattock of the Danish invader done Time's work for him.

On the eastern side was no indication of wall. When the Romans planned and raised their stronghold, the tall cliff and the sea which rolled almost to its very base would be its best protection. But when Euretta took her three little pupils thither to gather blackberries, the inland cliff was clothed with a rich growth of bushes and

brambles, ash trees and birch, that had for many generations served to charm the eye and rob the hoary ruins of their grimness.

A dry and dusty road, which had for ages forgotten the wash of the sea, led their feet below the high bank to the picturesque farm-house nestling securely under shelter of the once formidable walls at the north-eastern angle, and when Euretta and the children approached the farm-gate, two open carriages were standing before it. There she brought the children to a standstill also.

A party of strangers stood on the other side of the gate, and one middle-aged gentleman was expatiating to the rest on the probability that the farm-house occupied the very spot "without the walls" warily assigned to St Augustine by King Ethelbert, where he and his Woden-worshipping followers might listen to the foreign monk's strange gospel, without danger of the demoniac enchantment possible under a roof. She and the children listened to the earnest little antiquary

in polite patience, waiting until his party had bent their backs to the steep ascent to the ruins, and under his leadership, passed between the double line of wall, before they entered the farm-yard and obtained from the farmer's wife the leave to "go blackberrying," which neither the miller nor his wife had considered a necessary preliminary.

The children grew impatient, for the antiquary and his friends blocked the narrow passage, whilst he, to prove his theory that it had been a covered way easily defended, pointed to hollows in the ivy-clad grey walls where beams might have rested; but the same good breeding which had withheld Hetty from stripping blackberry bushes without leave, caused her to hold the eager little girls in check, until a gap in the wall on the right hand might free them.

Before that occurred one of the ladies observed them, and made way for the children and their attendant to pass; at the same time requesting a younger lady to do the same.

"Thank you, ladies," said Hetty, as she sent on the children in single file before her, accompanying the simple words with an inclination of the head so graceful as to arrest attention.

"That is a very polite young person," observed the elder and taller lady, who wore a white Paisley scarf-shawl over a black silk dress, and a row of old-fashioned crisp curls under the white lining of her black-satin drawn bonnet. "Did you notice how gracefully she acknowledged our little act of courtesy?"

"Yes, Miss Ainslie, and how she keeps those children in order, too," assented the other, raising her gold eyeglass, and following their retreating figures with an aspect of perplexity. "It occurs to me I have seen the young woman before, somewhere; her features are quite familiar."

"Well, she has a face not to be easily forgotten," said Miss Ainslie. "There is a kind of pensive beauty about it very uncommon. Just the sort of face one sees in a picture. By-the-bye, Paul showed to

me— Be careful, Mrs Bemerton, or you will step on your thin dress and tear it!" The broken sentence remained unfinished, and what Paul had shown her was not told.

The caution was needed. They had reached the confined key-shaped outlet, where the Rye girls had disappeared, and were stumbling between rugged walls, over rising ground so much more rugged as to suggest the existence of steps in the dim ages of antiquity. Then, the skirts of the period were worn not only very full from the waist downwards, but long enough to be imperilled by an incautious foot; and when they emerged from the short angular passage into the open area within the walls, there was a long rent between the stripes of the delicate white and blue gauzy balzarine, which hung like a stirrup in front.

"Dear, dear, how provoking! This comes of joining Bemerton's antiquarian expeditions."

"In unsuitable garments, my dear," quietly added her husband, who had been

close enough to overhear. "You can pin it up for the occasion, and when we get home I can add the dress to my museum of antiquities."

"Antiquities indeed! It is a new material!"

"Ah! converted by a touch into an old gown," quoth he, drily.

Matrimonial sparring would not repair the damage. Three ladies could only furnish a single pin, and when Mr Bemerton carried off his male friends across the stubble field to explore the subterranean puzzle in the centre, known as St Augustine's Cross, he left his wife, ruefully pinning the one long loop into two short ones.

By this time Euretta and the children, in their clean sun-bonnets, had crossed the field, with their little baskets, and the miller's walking-stick, which she had brought to drag outlying brambles within safe reach of little gatherers; for, be it understood, they grew on the verge and steep of the precipitous bank, where a careless step meant a dangerous fall.

Mrs Bemerton, in quest of pins, instinctively glanced across at the blackberry hunters, whose merry calls and laughter she could hear. As instinctively she picked up the long loop of tattered skirt, and hastened towards them.

"Can you oblige me with a pin or two? I have torn my dress," said she to Euretta, who turned on the instant.

"Certainly, madam; but a stitch or two would be better." Straightway, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Euretta wiped her stained fingers on a dock leaf, and with a word to bid the children "play in the field" until she was ready, she took an old-fashioned needle-and-thread-case from her pocket, and, kneeling on the grassy border, repaired the disaster with the neatness and celerity of a practised needlewoman.

As she rose to her feet, Mrs Bemerton, who had eyed her curiously the while, after thanking her, remarked, "Those children are very obedient. Are you their sister or their nurse?"

"Their nursery governess," said Euretta, with a slight flush.

"Can we come, Hetty?" cried Nelly. "Are you ready?"

"Hetty?" repeated the lady. "You are surely not the young girl I saw at Stonar House two years ago, when I required a maid for my daughters?"

"Yes, madam. My mother thought me too young then to go so far away. But now, if such a situation were offered me, I should be glad to accept it; that is," she corrected herself, "as soon as Mrs Rye can supply my place. I have not yet said I wish to change."

"So, she is not being dismissed," thought Mrs Bemerton, "and she was highly commended to me. Rose does not suit me at all, and this young person might be willing to hear the little ones their lessons now and then, as well as take charge of the wardrobes of Florence and Maud. I might dispense with a resident governess then." And so, being like Johnny Gilpin's wife, of "a frugal mind," she put the

question of willingness to "Hetty;" to be answered readily enough in the affirmative.

The children were becoming impatient, and Euretta saw it. Respectfully, but decidedly, she gave the lady, who continued her catechism, to understand this.

"Excuse me, madam, the children demand my care. My time is not my own. I must refer you to Mrs Rye of the Black Mill for anything more."

The youngsters came back to the blackberries; the lady returned to her friends, simply remarking that Hetty would most likely hear from her.

Children have sharp ears and ready tongues. Nelly went back to the mill with her head full of the lady who had torn her dress, and "wanted Hetty to go and live with her."

This precipitated an explanation, so far at least as regarded Euretta's desire to leave the mill. Mrs Rye was angry with the stranger for "unsettling the lass's mind," and with "Hetty" for "being so ready to leave old friends for strangers."

Her mother and the vicar were equally surprised, and advised her to remain where she was; but Will Ashurst, though he said he "should lose the sweetest voice in his choir if she left Sandwich," quite approved her intention to quit the miller's roof. He had not been her escort home so long without an inkling that the miller's sons were the primary cause of her desire for change.

They, in their eagerness to prevent her departure and win her to remain, made love to her in downright open earnest, and so persecuted her in their different ways that, if there had been no romantic ideal in her own mind, they would still have defeated their own aims. As it was, she hailed with thankfulness the letter sent by Mrs Bemerton, ten days later, which led to her removal to Canterbury about the middle of October. And Mrs Rye, whose eyes were opened to the jealous rivalry and hopeless attachment of her two sons, was no longer anxious to retain her.

The girl had anticipated a flood of tears and lamentations from her mother, whose

mysterious income was at the root of what little opposition she made. Indeed, she was hoping better things for both; but whether time had taught her composure, or she had become accustomed to Euretta's absence, or she was herself so content and comfortable in all respects as no longer to need the solace of her daughter's frequent presence, she bore the parting, in the little square hall of the vicarage, with more equanimity than had been looked for; shedding tears of course, but not a deluge.

Her only insistance was that "there was no longer a necessity for her daughter to take an inferior situation."

The Canterbury coach took up Euretta and her box at the end of the bleak road leading to the Black Mill, and as she was whirled away, she carried with her a vision of friendly faces and waving hands; so many were there to see her off; Will Ashhurst and his wife among the rest.

What she had left behind her she knew, or thought she did; what lay before her she knew not. The sadness of many part-

ings began to oppress her, and she also began to have misgivings that she had not been altogether wise in changing the known for the unknown. But she leaned back, looking out of the coach-window with that old dreamy expression in her wondrous eyes, as if questioning the far-off future, lost to the present, and oblivious of her three fellow-passengers, whose talk was all of the war in the Crimea, and the movements of our troops.

She had no vision, not she, of the fierce struggle between contending armies abroad, or that other fierce struggle nearer home between the miller's two sons, each accusing the other of driving her away from the mill. She could not see how words came to blows, or how the light-hearted banterer Dan, worked up to fury by the bitter taunts of Colin, snatched up his floury cap and without a word of farewell to father or mother was off through the streets of Sandwich as if spurred by demons, only pausing to take breath when what had been Sandown Gate was left behind, and he stood alone on

the bare Deal road, and then kept doggedly on, on, even through the town till the barracks at Walmer received him, to be heard of no more until the Kentish militiaman was a soldier, duly attested and enrolled.

She saw nothing of this, or it would indeed have saddened her to think that the step she had taken to preserve harmony in the family of the Ryes, had only precipitated the collision she feared. The attentions, the love of the two brothers, so differently shown, had filled her, not with exultation, but distress, and, could she have known of their final quarrel and its result, she would have felt it a crowning disaster. She had experienced nothing but kindness from the miller and his wife, and she had meant to do them a good turn—not an ill one, in quitting them.

By-and-by her wandering thoughts came home; she took note of things upon the road. The tramp with his bundle on a stick, the children by the cottage door, the itinerant tinker at work, the loitering gipsies on nooks of greensward, the thinning hedge-

rows, the red and yellow leaves, the clouds that flecked the sky and flung their shadows over grass and stream were no longer lost to her; and her ear was open to an animated discussion of the relative merits of two Hussar officers named Ainslie and Norreys, who had distinguished themselves in the recent passage of the Alma.

Captain Ainslie was evidently, from the conversation, a Kentish landowner, as were his two partisans, who maintained that there never was a finer man nor a finer soldier than old Major Ainslie, and that the son took after him; and that the airs Captain Norreys had given himself when his regiment was stationed at Deal the previous year, needed some soldierly bravery to carry them off. A taste of actual service might take the conceit out of him,—and so on.

One word had caught Euretta's attention.

"Norreys! that was surely the name of her mother's aunt, and she had a son in the army,—could this Captain Norreys be her own cousin?" It never occurred to her

simplicity that the name was common and the army-list a long one. She listened to one disparaging anecdote after another, only the more convinced that he must be one of those Norreys who had been so cruel to her poor mother.

Presently the other passenger struck in,—

"You had Pierce Hathersage, the artist, staying among you in Deal a summer or two back, I understand. He brought home a number of local sketches and commissions from the officers at the barracks. And now I hear he has been sent out to the Crimea by one of the illustrated papers. Well, he will be quite in his element."

Insensibly the listening girl associated this Pierce Hathersage with self-sufficient Captain Norreys, and the sketch made upon the bridge, and her old indignation revived within her. If she thought of the Captain Ainslie so freely eulogised, it was but to take for granted that *he* would not have countenanced the artist's boldness. What would have been her thoughts had she known that even whilst she was being

bowled along the Canterbury road towards another phase of servitude, with her dreamy eyes looking out on denuded hop gardens, stacked poles, and queer-capped hop-drying oasts, and her memory was sent back by strangers to an artist sketching on Sandwich Bridge with an officer by his side—that her grandfather Martin Copeland, resting on the arm of his nephew Martin Norreys, was standing in front of a printseller's in Cheapside, London, intently gazing on the finished picture ?

Yet by that duality, or affinity, or coincidence which so strangely influences human affairs, it was so.

The white-haired city merchant had taken to picture collecting of late years, to fill up the vacuum in his heart and home. He was given to scan the dealers' windows as he passed.

His attention had been arrested by a fine oil-painting, the central figure of which was a young girl with a basket at her feet, leaning back against the parapet of a long bridge with her head upraised and large

dreamy eyes looking at something between sky and river — that was neither. The atmosphere seemed to glow with heat; there were other figures in the distance, quaint riverside buildings, and a queer old gateway that seemed half plank, half-stone, and in the hazy perspective might be caught a suggestive gleam of the winding-river.

But Martin Copeland for once saw none of the accessories, he saw only a face, the face of his long-lost Margaret, idealised and beautified by the painter's art, but still her face as he saw it framed before him in the day, and nightly in his dreams.

It was useless calling his nephew's attention to the strange resemblance, he either did not or would not see it.

"Nonsense, uncle, there is more power and character in that face than in Margaret's; besides, the hair and eyes are darker;" and he would have drawn his uncle away.

"Pshaw! those are small matters! I tell you I have seen that expression upon

Margaret's face scores of times when Carl was away at sea, both before her marriage and after. The precise shade of eyes or hair has nothing to do with the expression. It has touched my heart, Martin, as if my girl had come before me in a peasant's garb. I must ascertain who is the artist, and where he found his model."

Martin Norreys, the soldier's son, might have told him had he been so minded. Many a time and oft in his boyhood, when his father's regiment was stationed at Deal, had he and other officers' sons scampered over the sand-hills to Sandwich, and watched the bridge swing back to let a vessel through.

All the benevolent vicar had told him of his cousin's poverty and her daughter's beauty came back to sear his conscience as with a branding-iron. It was with a feeling of desperation he followed his uncle into the shop in order to hear the worst, and make the best of it.

Mr Copeland was well known to the dealers. As his questions were answered

one by one, his junior partner drew his breath more freely.

"'The Day Dreamer' is by Pierce Hathersage."

"We cannot tell where you will find the artist now, sir. His studio is closed. He has gone out to the Crimea with our army. There is no telling where he found his model or his scene. Mr Hathersage sent the picture to us in a hurry, on the eve of his departure, with a price upon it."

"And that is—"

"Seventy guineas, sir."

"I'll take it. Send it home."

Had they asked a hundred Martin Copeland would have thought it cheap. His daughter Margaret seemed appealing to him from the canvas, and he forgot how years had sped since the same girlish look was hers. All he cared to learn was how the accidental likeness came there? Who was the artist's model?

CHAPTER X.

DRAWING NEARER.

HAD a ghost risen up before Mrs Norreys, she could not have been more scared than when Pierce Hathersage's picture was sent home.

She felt like the prisoner in the mechanical iron cell, seeing the walls and roof shrink and grow nearer day by day, with all the appalling presentiment of certain doom.

Was not Sandwich bridge and gate as well known to her as to her sons. If conscience had slept long, had not Sandwich been a hideous nightmare to her for the

past two years? Was her memory such that she could not trace the lineaments and the parentage of the girl depicted there so livingly?

Was she not thankful no one else was present when the dealer's man removed the green baize covering and set the painting well in view?

She was indeed. The eyeglass dropped —the quick hand to the heart — the spasmodic contraction of face — the whitened lips—the sudden collapse into the nearest seat—were easier passed off as of "no moment," "an attack too slight and common to claim attention, the result of a weak heart," than if Smiles or his master had been there to observe.

Yet even they might have set the spasm down to the best of affectionate remembrance called up by the unexpected presentment of a likeness so palpable; seeing how subject to such attacks Mrs Norreys had become of late.

The wreck was an established fact; the drowning a foregone conclusion; never a

ship could have sailed into Sandwich Haven that carried merchandise for Martin Copeland; and the little drowsy seaport was a terra-incognita alike to master and man. What had she to fear?

Yet the very coming of the picture showed that there were latent forces arrayed against her; and, though she schooled herself to meet her brother and hear the story of its purchase with no more than natural excitement, her nerves were all in a secret quiver. The distinguished bravery of her son Cecil at the Alma had been followed by congratulations in shoals. Who would congratulate her in disgrace? She was paying a long penalty for her hasty deed.

Like a reprieve to the condemned was the hearing that "no information about the picture could be had until the artist returned from the Crimea." Perhaps he might never return! Some stray bullet might—at least time was gained for thinking and planning. If the girl and her mother could only be removed to a dis-

tance! And that horrid clergyman—but that might be managed.

She little imagined that, even as she caught her breath, and thought, and planned, the girl was with strangers away from Sandwich, almost within the shadow of Canterbury Cathedral, assisting to remove the travelling wraps of her own old friend, Miss Ainslie.

From her mother and Mrs Ashurst "Hetty" had received copious instructions with regard to her new duties and deportment in a large establishment, and Mrs Bemerton's own maid had consented to indoctrinate the novice in the mysteries of her calling. She had not expected to be placed on the familiar footing with the family she served, as heretofore; but as little had she expected to be a mere wheel among other wheels in a complex domestic machine, required to work together without friction, but having no more sympathy with each other or with those they served than had the sails of the mill with Mrs Rye.

It checked the warm currents of her heart, and made reserve again a necessity. Only in the schoolroom with the youngsters did she feel at ease.

There was very little sympathy between the heads of the family, so how could it be expected with domestics? Changes were frequent.

Mr Bemerton, much older than his fashionable wife, was a man of learning, given up to antiquarian research and literature. The string of honourable capitals after his name might be likened to the tail of a comet. Men of cognate pursuits from half the dry-as-dust societies in Europe found their way to his library—a sort of archæological museum. Mrs Bemerton's sole consolation was, that in entertaining these celebrated strangers she had an excuse for filling her drawing-room with more acceptable society.

She had a marriageable daughter to dispose of, and a second who would shortly be in the same category. These two young ladies, Miss Bemerton and Miss

Maud, claimed the especial services of "Fleming." There were three younger girls in the nursery and schoolroom, and after the daily governess had gone home, and Florence and Maud were dressed for the evening, she was expected to take her sewing into the schoolroom and superintend lessons and music practice.

There were sons of intermediate ages, but as these were away at Harrow they need not be specified.

In her engagement with Mrs Bemerton, Euretta (she was "Fleming" henceforth) had made an express stipulation that she should be allowed an hour a day in her own room, free from intrusion or inquiry, and once a week two hours to go whithersoever she pleased. There had been both surprise and demur at this, but to obtain these privileges the girl expressed her willingness to rise earlier than others, to neglect no duty, and to accept a lower monetary consideration than her predecessor. The latter inducement had its full weight. Mrs Bemerton thought the re-

quest savoured of eccentricity, said it was "singular," shrugged her shoulders, and consented. Euretta was undertaking double duty for single pay, hence the concession.

Miss Bemerton and Miss Maud, both fairly attractive young ladies, who followed in the fashionable wake of mamma, made merry over this whimsy of their new maid, and thought by filling every moment of her time to leave her no spare hour for herself. She was ever willing to do little matters out of her own province, but no sooner did she comprehend their drift, than she began to lay aside whatsoever work she was engaged on when the clock struck, and to retire.

If this caused them personal inconvenience, they knew they had no ground for complaint, and soon ceased to interfere with the plans of their deft and obliging handmaid; though not without some exhibition of curiosity.

Her fellow-servants were not one whit less curious than their betters, and were at first inclined to resent this concession; but

she gave herself no airs, and though her composure and reserve were impenetrable, they were not offensive. Then, thanks to her early-rising habits, she could find time to help lie-a-beds in a morning, and was as ready to assist in the arrangement of a table as to keep accounts for the housekeeper. And she contrived to do it without encouraging familiarity. As the butler said, she was "like a lump of sugar in a glass case; no one got any nearer to her."

Why she was so ready to render service beyond her own province, was part of her secret—for she had a secret.

She soon found the advantage of her own reserve. It kept admiring men-servants at a distance, prevented jealousy among the maids in the kitchen, and made her a favourite with Mrs Royle the housekeeper, if not with Mrs Bemerton's own maid, Simpkin. *She* never tolerated a possible rival near her own throne.

Euretta had not been in her new situation many hours before she was required

to assist Miss Bemerton and a lady visitor in dressing for a concert; nor half that time before she heard the young ladies dilating on the glorious deeds of a Captain Ainslie, and regretting that he was no longer at home to be of their party that evening.

"Captain Ainslie!" How strangely familiar seemed the name after that colloquy in the stage-coach! Could he be the same individual spoken of? "Paul,"—yes, that was the same name; and the lady she had to dress was Miss Ainslie, the officer's aunt.

All this Euretta heard whilst she was being inducted into the secrets of drawers and wardrobes, and whilst fastidious Miss Bemerton fixed on the dress and adornments she would wear.

"How singular," ran her thoughts, "that I should hear so much of Captain Ainslie in the coach, and come at once among his friends. Perhaps I shall hear something of that odious Captain Norreys before long."

She did hear him mentioned casually in the course of time, but not then. The Norreys did not belong to Kent, and there was no intimacy between the families.

Of Paul Ainslie she soon heard sufficient to show that Miss Bemerton was desirous to appropriate him to herself, if she had not already done so, and she early found herself speculating whether the young lady was worthy the noble and distinguished hero.

She speedily discovered that Miss Ainslie was the tall, thin lady with the crisp little curls, who had so politely made way for herself and the little Ryes to pass between the ancient walls of Richborough, and found herself wondering if the captain in the Crimea had as sweet a voice, and was as handsome as his pleasant-looking aunt must have been.

At all events, she found the maiden lady much easier to please, less exacting, and sooner satisfied than either of her young mistresses, and she could not help wishing

that fortune had thrown her into Miss Ainslie's service instead.

She also found her quite as full of the hero's gallant deeds, and as willing to discourse of his bravery and generosity to *any* listener, as they had been to each other regardless of her insignificant presence.

She could not fail to observe how gracious Mrs Bemerton and her daughters were to Miss Ainslie during the week of her stay; had she been their own relative, with a fortune at her disposal, they could scarcely have been more so.

You see, she had a distinguished nephew, not yet disposed of, and *he* had a fortune worth the winning.

Miss Ainslie and Mrs Bemerton had been old school friends. The former, therefore, was very much at home in the house of the latter, and she made a point of visiting the younger girls in the schoolroom every evening after dinner.

She had thus frequent opportunities of observing Euretta under other conditions

than as a "mistress of the robes;" she saw that she was on the best of terms with the young people, knew how to smooth asperities in the path of knowledge, and to win her gamesome charges to their studies —not tasks. She found too that she possessed information outside the common routine of school-books, and was familiar with authors whose very names were beyond the ordinary range of girls of seventeen.

On one occasion she surprised Euretta at the schoolroom piano singing to the girls the English version of *Partant Pour la Syrie*, newly popularised by the war and our alliance with France.

The schoolroom was almost at the top of the house, and as Miss Ainslie paused to take breath on the last flight of stairs, sweet and clear as the note of a silver bell rang out—

"It was Dunois the young and brave,
Was bound to Palestine,
But first he made his orisons
Before St Mary's shrine.

'And grant, immortal Queen of Heaven,
Was still the soldier's prayer,
'That I may prove the bravest knight,
And love the fairest fair.'"

She listened in surprise and delight until the last line of the refrain was finished, before she entered to discompose the singer.

Euretta rose and apologised.

"I was merely singing to amuse the children."

"Don't apologise," said Miss Ainslie, "but sit down and finish the song *to oblige me*. I sang it myself when I was as young as you, and now that I have a brave young knight in the East, it seems to have a fuller significance. So, sit down, my dear, and begin again."

"Oh, do, do!" cried the little girls, pressing round her.

Without more ado she resumed her seat and began. Miss Ainslie's head kept time with the music, but not until the last note vibrated on the air did she make a remark.

Then she said, "Well, Miss Fleming" (she had been merely "Fleming" hitherto),

"when I ascended those stairs I little anticipated the treat in store for me. You have a fresh, sweet voice, and it has been uncommonly well cultivated. May I know who has been your teacher?"

"The blind choir-master of our church —St Mary's, in Sandwich, I mean," she added, correcting herself, "his name is William Ashurst."

"Ashurst! Ashurst!" repeated Miss Ainslie, "do you know what part of Kent he belongs to?"

"I never heard."

"Was he always blind?"

"No, he was blinded by a lightning-flash that set his farm on fire, when he was a young man."

Miss Ainslie seemed strangely moved, "I think I must have known him," said she, rising to go, and forgetting to say "good night."

The following day she left for Ainslie Holt. Before she went she offered to Euretta a handsome gratuity, as had been her wont with others.

Euretta appeared at once surprised and hurt. "Thank you, Miss Ainslie, but I cannot accept it. Mrs Bemerton pays me for my time and services."

Miss Ainslie looked fixedly at the flushed and beautiful face before her. "I find I made a mistake," said she. "I am sorry. I shall be more careful on future occasions."

"Good-byes" were said, and she went to her waiting carriage, followed by Euretta with shawls and wraps, wondering if Mrs Bemerton knew or appreciated the superior young person engaged in her service. And somehow the erect and slender lady, whose gentle face was quaintly set in stiff, prim, silvering round curls, under the full border of her bonnet-cap, in thinking of "Miss Fleming" thought also of Will Ashurst, not as a poor basket-maker, but as a prosperous young farmer, tall and handsome as her own brother had been ; and she sighed as she thought. Memory had brought back the days of her own youth, and a vision of the squire her father, erect, proud,

stern, and decisive, setting his foot on two loves and lives.

Before another week had sped all England was ringing with the news of the battle of Balaclava, and its terrific pendant the Charge of the Light Brigade, and if the pulses of ordinary men and women quickened as they read the first hurried telegrams, what must have been the dread excitement of those who waited to learn if their dear ones were amongst the victorious few, or the glorious many left with their steeds on the trampled soil of the fatal valley; since immortalised as the "Valley of Death."

Barely could the report have reached Ainslie Holt before Miss Ainslie's carriage was tearing along the road to Canterbury, and when it stopped at the Bemertons' door, the horses were all in a froth.

There was a dinner-party on the *tapis*, and her arrival had evidently discomposed her friend, though the Bemertons were genuinely interested in the fate of the gallant hussar. But there was no disguising the

fact that it was a relief to both Florence and her mamma when Miss Ainslie said she was not in a frame of mind to meet strangers, and would dine with the children in the school-room. She had "merely come into Canterbury for the earliest intelligence from the seat of war"—and her lips were very white as she said it.

There was no music in the schoolroom that evening. The three girls, more impressionable than their elders, were awed by the nervous restlessness of Miss Ainslie's manner, and her pale anxious face, all so different from her ordinary pleasant smiles and calm demeanour. And they listened eagerly to her loving reminiscences of the nephew, who had grown from boyhood to manhood, as it were, in her charge—the nephew whose fate was so uncertain, and of whom her heart was so full.

Miss Ainslie had, part of the time, another auditor whose interest and sympathy were of another order, and insensibly the speaker found herself addressing "Miss

Fleming," towards whom her very heart seemed drawn.

Not that Euretta said much. At times her eyes were fixed dreamily upon the fire, but Miss Ainslie saw that she lost no word of her discourse ; and that she could appreciate the chivalry of the boy, Paul, as surely as the heroism of Captain Ainslie.

Indeed so much had Euretta heard of Captain Ainslie of late, as a partner in a dance, or a partner for life, as well as a soldier, that when the news came a few days later that he had escaped with a slight wound, she shared the general relief, and offered her modest congratulations to his friendly relative quite as if she had personally known him and his worth. It was then, too, that she heard again of Captain Norreys, and, again, in a way to bring the gallantry of Paul Ainslie only the more prominently forward.

It appeared that he had received his wound in riding to the succour of Captain Norreys, of his own regiment, who had been desperately wounded in the attempted

capture of a Russian gun. He had rescued his brother-officer, and silenced the gun, but he carried the head of a Cossack lance away in his thigh as a memorial. A brief line from himself conveyed the assurance that he was in "no danger."

That night, "Dunois the young and brave" was again sung in the schoolroom, and the antiquary was added to the auditory, Mrs Bemerton and her elder daughters "having an engagement they could not possibly break," an engagement in which he was not included. Miss Ainslie, whose visit had been unexpected and uninvited, could not reasonably object; but she could think that the narrow escape of Paul had not affected Miss Florence very deeply. Never again could the young lady regain the hold on the elder lady's heart, which had been hers until then. "Shallow and frivolous," was the tender-hearted aunt's verdict; "quite unworthy of my noble Paul." And she was right.

Back to the Holt she went the next morning with her own load of anxiety

considerably lightened, in spite of the heavy drizzle and mist which ushered in November. And as she left the house, she found herself contrasting Miss Florence with her maid Fleming, much to the disadvantage of the former.

When tidings came of the frightful hurricane which had swept the Black Sea and the Crimea on the 13th, breaking up our ships like soap-bubbles, giving our seamen and stores to the deep, hurling and whirling tents and tables, clothing and bedding through the air like snow-flakes in a storm, leaving sick and wounded officers and men exposed to wet and cold, fireless and foodless, in a muddy slough—the suffering of our army was the theme of every tongue.

Euretta heard with tingling ears and wondered how Miss Ainslie could bear it, seeing how sad and wretched it made her only to think of it; wondered if Captain Ainslie's wound had begun to heal before the storm, and if Captain Norreys had survived it.

Meanwhile Miss Ainslie, who had no spirit to entertain friends at the Holt whilst its dearly-loved master was exposed to the pitiless winter with his wound unhealed, paced the deserted rooms in restless anxiety, or drove into Canterbury and back, wishing she could transfer to the Holt the fair maid whose sympathies were finer than those of her employers.

Coming and going, if only for a "call," Miss Ainslie's perceptions were alive to the fact that Mrs Bemerton was as usual growing dissatisfied with her new maid, and that she was herself in part accountable.

The fact was that the notice she and others had taken of the new dependant had excited the envy and jealousy of the rest.

In the servants' hall Fleming was stigmatised as artful and deceitful; the mystery of her daily hour alone, and of her weekly walks abroad, were freely canvassed, and spies were on the watch.

Simpkin, Mrs Bemerton's own maid, led the clique, and she had the ear of her mistress.

It reached a climax at Christmas.

CHAPTER XI.

TWO CONCERT TICKETS.

WAR, pestilence, and famine may stalk abroad, but no stop must be put on public entertainment. Nay, suffering and disaster often furnish an excuse for a fête—for charity.

The untellable, unimaginable wretchedness and privations of our soldiers in the Crimea, compelled to winter on its inhospitable shores, with no adequate provision against its inclemency after the November hurricane had made havoc of their stores by land and by sea, roused at once public indignation and compassion.

Cholera and dysentery began their deci-

mating work before a blow of battle had been struck; then when food, forage, physic, clothing, covering, all went to the bottom of the Black Sea—when rascally contractors sent out bogus supplies, and our men were perishing for want of necessaries, popular indignation found vent in relief subscriptions; a sweet Derbyshire Nightingale flew on the wings of an angel to mitigate the horrors of the hospital at Scutari, and her sisters at home were busy helpers, scraping linen for lint, tearing up letters for stuffing pillows, knitting warm gloves and comforters, selecting and collecting books to be sent out, and everywhere performances were given to raise funds.

Canterbury had its sacred concert. It was patronised by the clergy and the *élite* of the gentry around. The organist of the cathedral was at once manager and conductor. Musicians and vocalists alike gave their services. And the programme included, besides selections from "The Messiah" and other oratorios, two violin

solos by a blind musician, a Mr William Ashurst.

This happened to be the only name on the programme of which nothing was known. Questions were asked, and soon it was buzzed abroad that Mr Ashurst was a *rara-avis* the organist was proud to have discovered and brought to light. Expectation was on the *qui vive*.

For a wonder expectation was not disappointed. The spirits of melody and harmony lay sleeping and imprisoned in his old violin to waken at the blind musician's touch. His bow swept over the strings as if his very soul were in his finger-tips, and thrilled to set the captive Ariels free. As brilliant, rapid, full-toned passages died away, in cadences so low and delicate that the listening ear could barely catch the thin thread of sound, there fell a breathless hush upon the auditory, which broke at the close into enthusiastic applause.

Will Ashurst had achieved a signal triumph before a critical audience.

"Only follow this up, Mr Ashurst," said the organist to him when the concert was over, and congratulations had poured upon him, "only follow it up, and your fortune is made. Why, I saw tears, absolutely tears, on the cheeks of Miss Ainslie—one of the Bemerton party."

"Miss *what?*" asked the other, with a sharp catch of his breath.

"Miss Ainslie, of Ainslie Holt. You may not know her, but she is a great patroness of our social talent. She has a finely-appreciative ear, and such a tribute from her is worth a whole round of applause."

"It is all very gratifying; and it may be as you say, sir," said Will Ashurst, after a momentary contraction of his countenance, "but I miss the 'well done' of the sweet little maid, who has led my steps to the footstool of that same fortune."

"Little maid! Do you call Miss Fleming little?" began the organist. "I call her—"

At that moment a tall lady, with a white

and grey opera-hood over her head, detached herself from her party (waiting with others of the dispersing audience for carriages), and, advancing towards the pair, laid her hand lightly on the arm of sightless Will, who started at the touch.

"Mr Ashurst," she said, in a softly-modulated voice, which yet held a tremor for his acute ear, "will you shake hands with me, and accept my congratulations. Many years have gone by since we met, but your bow has not lost its cunning. You have achieved an undoubted success. For my own part, I am proud to find your great talent devoted to so noble a purpose, and in the name of my nephew and his fellow-soldiers in the Crimea, I thank you most sincerely."

He had taken the proffered hand, and held it for a moment.

"It is, indeed, long since we met, and might have been longer, but for a young girl I had hoped to meet to-night. What music I had taught her caused my introduction here."

"May I ask how?"

"Well, it is rather a long story. She lived under my humble roof with her mother for many years, and having no children of our own, my wife and I took kindly to the winning little thing. She became as much my companion as my fiddle, and by means of a game I invented for her, picked up the theory of music long before she had regular lessons on an instrument. Coming to live in Canterbury, she went to Mr Spencer here to improve her execution on the pianoforte. He was pleased to say something in praise of her early training. That introduced my name. He came over to Sandwich to see me, and—here I am—so you see—I do owe my appearance and reception here; and my accidental meeting with you, Miss Ainslie, after all these years of change, to the girl who is *not* here to shake hands with her friends; for I did not come hither alone."

Miss Ainslie, who had observed a short, fussy individual assiduously offering a silver snuff-box to a tall, thin clerical gentle-

man, and to the organist, all apparently waiting, then said,—

"Is her name Fleming?"

His face brightened.

"Ah, to be sure, you will know Hetty. She lives with your friends. Perhaps you can tell me why she has disappointed us to-night?"

"Yes, I know her, and she interests me greatly. There has been some little unpleasantness at Mrs Bemerton's to-day; and in consequence Fleming could not obtain permission. She may see you in the morning, if you do not leave Canterbury to-night. When I return to the Holt, I *think* she will go with me. She is leaving Mrs Bemerton. I perceive my friends grow impatient. Good-night, Mr Ashurst."

And so the two, who had been lovers in their youth, whom adverse fate, in the guise of a determined sire, proud of his birth and social status, had sundered for more than a quarter of a century, met and parted with a hand clasp. They had outlived the sorrow of their separation. He,

in his blindness and poverty, had found a mate and consolation. She, in her wealth, was still—unwedded and alone.

Her hand was small and soft, her voice was fresh and sweet—she was unchanged to *him*. But she had eyes to see how time, misfortune, toil, and his supreme affliction had changed the man she had known, and for whose sake she was still Miss Ainslie.

"A little unpleasantness," she had said. It was something more than that.

She had been present when Euretta, with some diffidence, had approached Mrs Bemerton, and solicited permission for herself and Mrs Royle to use two concert tickets which had been sent to her.

Mrs Bemerton threw herself back in her chair, and stared at the petitioner, as if struck dumb with surprise.

"I should not have presumed to ask," said the girl, with heightened colour and a little nervous folding of her hands, "if Mr Ashurst had not been one of my very earliest friends; the one to whom I owe

nearly all I know of music. He will bring me news of my mother and other friends in Sandwich."

"Did Mr Ashurst send you the tickets?" put Mrs Bemerton, with severe scrutiny.

"No, madam."

"Then who else presumed to send tickets to my servant for a concert which I was known to patronise."

The lady's loftiness was superb.

Euretta was silent.

"I presume they came from that other friend of yours, the organist, whom you visit so stealthily every week!" cried Mrs Bemerton, hurling the accusation at the young woman as if it were overwhelming.

Euretta's nervousness was gone, and her colour with it.

"I visit no one by stealth, madam. When I came to Canterbury, I brought a letter of introduction from our good vicar to Mr Spencer. I am having music-lessons from him."

Mrs Bemerton's scorn was intense. She eyed the girl from head to foot.

"What can a lady's-maid want with high-class music-lessons?"

Again the colour rose to Euretta's very brow, but in her answer she was cool, and calm, and unpresuming.

"I have so far found them useful in the school-room. And I am endeavouring to qualify for something higher than a lady's-maid."

"For a lady, may be!" and Mrs Bemerton's lip curled. Then she demanded, with sudden asperity, "For what are you qualifying when you waste an hour a-day playing 'baby-house' with toys?"

Euretta started; the pupils of her large dark eyes dilated, and her finely-sensitive nostrils quivered as the humane lady-patroness of the coming concert turned to Miss Ainslie, and with a short, derisive laugh, said,—

"What think you, my dear? This young person, who has concert-tickets sent to her from the conductor, and who may possibly be 'qualifying' for a *prima-donna*, stipulated with me for an hour a day in

the privacy of her own room, and for what? For study or devotion? Oh, no! Only that she may spread her table with a toy tea-service or dinner-service as the case may be, and hold a Barmecide feast with imaginary guests! It is all so ridiculous, that one can but laugh; still it is not pleasant to have made a foolish concession to a dependant for so absurd a purpose."

Miss Ainslie, who had once or twice been on the point of retiring, and who had only testified her uneasiness at the tenor of this colloquy by the more energetic dart of her crochet-hook through the red woollen loops of the soldier's comforter she was working, looked up with her serene eyes, and said, placably,—

"I think, Matilda, there could be no harm in Fleming going with Mrs Royle to hear her old friend; and I daresay she can explain all that you think absurd."

Mrs Bemerton's snappy "Go? certainly not!" had a sudden check.

Euretta was speaking. Her voice was as clear and firm as when she had a wilful

child to control. "I decline to enter into explanations with a mistress who descends to espionage, or to serve one who does not respect her own contract. You will have the goodness, madam, to provide the young ladies with another maid."

Without another word she left the room, mistress of the situation, but all in a quiver with the suppression of her own supreme contempt and disgust.

"Someone must have been watching my movements both indoors and out," she said to herself. "Either Mrs Bemerton has employed spies, or she has encouraged them, and either is dishonourable. I would not stay in the place another day if I did not fear I should disturb my mother. I could go to the Ashurst for a time, I know, and I might ask Miss Ainslie to recommend me to a new situation. There is no one here I need regret but the children."

She made the request to Miss Ainslie whilst dressing her hair for the concert. There had already been a little "difference of opinion" between that lady and Mrs

Bemerton respecting the maid who spent her leisure in "child's play," and the maid who stealthily looked on through the chink of a door, and carried tales to her mistress.

Mrs Bemerton had decided on the summary dismissal of Fleming on the morrow —when the concert was *over;* and Miss Ainslie, who had taken a liking to the girl, "who somehow reminded her of someone she had known," had begun to consider how far she would be justified in countenancing one whom her friend discarded, when Euretta solicited her recommendation.

It gave her an excuse for asking how much of Mrs Bemerton's statement was correct.

"All," answered Euretta steadily. "All that was seen, nothing that was guessed. What might seem child's play was serious study. Believe me, Miss Ainslie, my motives were not frivolous, though I could not condescend to enter into an explanation with Mrs Bemerton. I partly engaged

with her in order to observe how a large establishment was conducted, how visitors were received, and how a lady presided at her own table. In my private hours I practised what I made occasions to observe. I had done so long before I left the Ryes. Some day I expect to occupy such a position as will need a higher training than I have had."

"Indeed! How is that?"

Euretta hesitated.

"Pardon me, I do not feel at liberty to say more. I should not have said so much had you not been so very kind and affable."

Miss Ainslie smiled, but did not press the question; she put another.

"Would you like to be a lady's companion and secretary? I think you are equal to the duties, and if so, I may be able to assist you."

With Euretta's well-pleased affirmative, the subject dropped for the time being.

Miss Ainslie, however, did not lose sight of it. Her advocacy of Euretta's

cause that morning had already produced a coolness between herself and Mrs Bemerton, hence her sudden intention to return home on the morrow. It had previously occurred to her that the youth and beauty of Miss Fleming might serve to brighten up the Holt, which had grown so dreary to its mistress, now that its master was in danger. She did not care altogether to provoke a rupture with her old schoolfellow. Yet so much of Matilda Bemerton's caprice had she seen at one time or other, she felt half inclined to risk it—and teach her a lesson. Hence her remark to Will Ashurst.

Her decision was speedily precipitated, a decision on which hung more than she could have foreseen.

Clouds lowered on Mrs Bemerton's brow when she took her seat behind the urn at the breakfast-table the morning after the concert. A blazing fire in the wide grate had multiple reflections in silver and glass, and Derby china, but its cheery rays went no farther. The antiquary was sarcastic,

Mrs Bemerton lofty and irate. It was very soon apparent that the ill-assorted pair were disagreeing about Fleming.

"Miss Ainslie," said he, over his coffee, "can you tell me where there is a manufactory for *perfect* people, such as ladies'-maids, governesses, and so forth. I thought we had found something very near the perfect article, one who could trim a top-knot, or a frock, give a lesson in music or good manners, and keep the nursery in order without bluster or bad English."

"I thought so too," she answered, smiling; "it appears we were mistaken."

Mrs Bemerton was warmer than her breakfast. Their words provoked a sneering retort.

"If you think Fleming such a paragon, you had better try her yourself, Miss Ainslie. Her ways may suit *you*, they do not suit *me*; and she quits this roof before the day is out."

"In that case," said Miss Ainslie quietly, "I think I will take your advice. I am in want of a lady-like and well-educated

companion, and I fancy she *will* just suit me."

Mrs Bemerton had not expected this. She put down her cup and opened wide her eyes.

"Bravo!" cried the antiquary, clapping his hands.

"Papa!" remonstrated Miss Bemerton, in a tone which said she was shocked at his ill-breeding; but "papa" was too well pleased to heed.

"A companion!" echoed his wife, with haughty amazement, and she shut her lips close to keep her wrath from boiling over.

Mrs Bemerton had already issued her fiat against Fleming, she had been told to pack her trunk and her dolls' china, and depart at once, with coin in lieu of legal notice, the lady's temper having risen under her spouse's sarcasms to a heat which overcame her economics.

Miss Ainslie's startling adoption of her own proposal was signal defeat. Her suspicions and airs had incommoded no one so much as herself. She had, moreover,

a vague impression that she had damaged the interests of her daughter Florence. This sudden adoption of their discarded maid spoke volumes. Florence was certain to reproach her with want of tact when they were gone.

Miss Ainslie soon made her arrangements with Euretta, packing was done, her carriage ordered, and the children, who clung around the latter, were promised they should come and visit her ere long at the Holt. Mrs Bemerton in high displeasure held aloof from leave-takings in the morning-room, but Mr Bemerton followed them to the carriage, and shook hands with Fleming as well as with her new mistress before the door was closed upon them.

"To the 'Fleur-de-Lys,'" said Miss Ainslie, and Euretta, who sat for the first time inside a private carriage, had scarcely overcome her strangeness, not to say awkwardness, when the vehicle stopped, and to her surprise she saw on the hotel steps, not only her blind

friend, but Dr Manningham, and the Rev. Austin Ughtred.

There were hand-shakings, greetings, introductions, explanations. The three men had been on the point of starting for the Bemertons to make inquiries about "Our Hetty," and if necessary to carry her home with them; both the vicar and the basket-maker offering her a home in any future emergency.

"You are all very, very kind to me," said Euretta, with much feeling, "and I cannot thank you sufficiently. I should indeed have needed a home for a time, if Miss Ainslie had not helped me out of my difficulty, when so abruptly dismissed this morning. My mind flew at once to Mrs Ashurst, I had not the presumption to think of the vicarage."

"You need not call it presumption, Etta. Your mother and I—" and there he stopped abruptly, adding after a pause, "could make room for you." But that was not what he had meant to say, for he seemed slightly confused.

"How is my mother?" asked Euretta.

Dr Manningham thrust himself forward.

"Quite well, Miss Hetty, never better. The air of the vicarage seems to agree with her. In fact, either that or her good fortune seems to have made a new woman of her. In fact, if she were to throw away her stick and walk without it I should not be surprised."

"Good fortune!" Euretta looked to the vicar for an explanation.

"Only another mysterious note," said he, in lowered tones, adding "she charged me to deliver this to you, she has so few uses for the money, and your salary has been too small to dress you properly," and he slipped a bank-note into the girl's hand, to her surprise.

She took it with thanks. The sum paid so grudgingly by Mrs Bemerton would, she was conscious, scarcely suffice to equip her for her new post, however quietly she might dress.

"Pray, Mr Ughtred," were her last words to him, "thank my mother, and

tell her that the continuation of this secret supply only strengthens my conviction that by some ways unknown as yet she will be reconciled to my grandfather, and obtain her rights in the end. It is a dream of mine that will surely come true."

Ah! that was her day-dream. But what of that other dream of which no whisper was ever heard? Did she think of that as she sat in front of the amiable lady, to whom she was now companion, the lady who seemed like herself lost in reverie as the carriage bowled along the frosty road, with sparks flying from the horses' hoofs?

Had she ever dreamed of that drive through those lodge-gates, or that chestnut avenue, sparkling and glittering with rime on every branch and spray? Had she ever dreamed of that long turreted stone mansion, with its mullioned windows and its embattled roof, with pendant icicles from coign and gargoyle? Had she ever dreamed of that wide entrance-hall, hung with trophies of war and the chase? Or

of her introduction to that white-haired housekeeper in black silk, who curtsied so respectfully when she was told,—

"This is a young friend of Mr William Ashurst's, who has come to live with me. You had better put her in the west turret room?"

No, she had never dreamed of this. And yet she felt as if she were in a dream at such reception. It was not that of a humble dependant.

She knew not how the friendship of vicar, and doctor, but most of all Will Ashurst, the poor blind basket-maker, had elevated *her*.

CHAPTER XII.

EURETTA'S DREAM.

EURETTA found life at Ainslie Holt very different from existence at the Bemertons. There her mistresses had been many, her duties multifarious, her position in the household ill defined. She had many times regretted the homelier familiarity of those she served at the Black Mill.

At Ainslie Holt she came at once into a fresh atmosphere, and was raised to a higher level. Miss Ainslie invariably treated her with respect, and addressed her as Miss Fleming, and whatever footman and coachman might have to say of

her in the servants' hall, relative to her former position at the Bemertons, they were respectful too. The mistress gave the tone to the household.

An old and valued companion of Miss Ainslie's had died the year before, and never been replaced; and some peculiar instinct or affinity had influenced her selection of Euretta to fill the vacant post. She had desired to engage her long before the rupture at the Bemertons. If it was an experiment, it proved a most successful one. There was nothing of the uplifted maid about the new companion.

All her life Euretta had been indoctrinated with the belief that she was held down beneath her own proper station, and that she must look up. Association with her mother had preserved her from vulgarity, and rising by gradations as she had done, suggested no undue cause for elation. She had all along been grateful to Miss Ainslie for courteous friendliness, so strongly in contrast with the manner of the Bemerton ladies, but though gratitude

swelled her heart, and set feet and hands in motion to serve, it was not openly demonstrative.

At the Holt, she soon learned to love the calm and kindly maiden lady, who set her at ease with herself, and made her duties so light and pleasurable ; who took her private hours alone for granted, rather than as an out-of-the-way concession.

Her octagonal room in the turret adjoined Miss Ainslie's, and though furnished like the rest of the mansion in a bygone style, it was furnished fully, with no meagre suggestiveness of provision for an inferior occupant. Nay, in the completeness of its fittings and arrangement, Euretta saw only fresh cause for gratitude and esteem of the kindly lady who provided even a case of books for the use of a dependant. She had made a change indeed. She had only to intimate a desire to adapt and amplify her wardrobe, and straightway she was charged also with a number of commissions for Miss Ainslie, and the phaeton placed at her disposal for a journey to Canterbury.

The lady could be gracious without becoming familiar.

Busiest of the busy in her zeal for the relief of our suffering soldiers was the mistress of the Holt in those days, and many were the visitors who came for conference, or with contributions for her collection of stores, but whatever their rank, one and all went away impressed with the rare beauty of Miss Fleming, and puzzled to decide whether she was Miss Ainslie's friend or "only her companion."

She became both ere long. Miss Ainslie had not expected to find in her so tireless a coadjutor. Knitting-pins, crochet-hook, needle, all were in her hands by turns, and plied with the dexterity of an adept. Comforters, muffatees, gloves, socks, shirts—nothing came amiss to her. She pitied the sick and suffering men, and worked away with all her heart and soul speeding her fingers. Had a lover or a brother been among the wounded, she could not have been more zealous or energetic. Not until the cases of stores were packed and de-

spatched, and correspondence with the main committee in London came to an end for the time being, did she allow herself breathing space.

This was not the routine work of an ordinary companion, and the spirit in which it was undertaken seemed to narrow the distance between the twain. Then under this excitement, and the genial influence of her new mistress, her own natural reserve gradually wore away. All she saw of Miss Ainslie but deepened her esteem and affection. Quiet and gentle though the maiden lady was, she had all the force of character which Euretta's mother lacked, and she, who inherited much of the sea captain's self-reliance, could not fail to appreciate and venerate. And though unspoken, Miss Ainslie could not fail to see how lovingly her wishes and desires were met or anticipated. They were thrown together, as it were, for mutual satisfaction and happiness.

No private letters reached the Holt from its distant master, and as day by day

she read aloud the distressing news from the seat of war, she seemed to partake the feverish excitement of Miss Ainslie, though, as she often told herself, Paul Ainslie could be to her no more than any other of the Queen's warlike lieges. And somehow she needed the self-reminder rather frequently.

But no wonder she shared the anxiety of the gracious lady for her nephew, when she herself heard his name and his praises on all tongues, from the village urchin to the portly rector, from the gardener's youngest assistant to the stately housekeeper, and not a cowboy on the estate but would touch his cap to her, and ask in a respectful undertone if there was any news of the good master.

She often found herself wondering what this captain of hussars was like, who had won his way into so many hearts, for though pictures of Paul from babyhood to boyhood hung upon the walls, there was no likeness of the man. The Sandhurst cadet had there his coloured presentment, but only as a youth of eighteen;

he must have changed in the course of ten years.

Still she found herself wondering, and strangely enough the boyish face seemed to perplex her, as it confused and mingled with an older image in her mind; the image of a bronzed and bearded man, who somehow had the same eyes.

The frost and snow had long disappeared, the drooping snowdrops and the bolder crocuses had vanished too; there was a fragrant scent of daffodils on the breeze, and the wood or holt which surrounded the mansion on three sides, and gave the place its name, seemed like a mist of dusky pink, with here and there a patch of tender green, waving above a sylvan carpet of young anemones and primroses, ground ivy and moss. There was a twittering of birds among the budding branches, and the first cuckoo had been heard, but still no letter came to Miss Ainslie from the captain, and expectation sank into something akin to dread.

Miss Ainslie sent a line of anxious in-

quiry to the War Office, and whilst red-tape and circumlocution kept her waiting, Euretta received a missive of importance which she did not expect. It was dated from St Mary's Vicarage, Sandwich, and ran thus :—

"My Dear Euretta, — It has been quite a pleasure to me and to Mr Ughtred to hear how delightfully you are situated, and how happy you are with Miss Ainslie. And we feel it is almost a shame to suggest a change to you that is not the change you have dreamed about so long.

"I am no nearer reconciliation to my estranged father than when you left us; though another mysterious bank-note came to me this week, and they can only come from him. Your dreams, so far, have not come true. But something has happened of which you cannot have dreamed.

"A *very* much better living has been offered to Mr Ughtred, in Sussex, and still near the coast. He has decided on accepting it. But he would not make that

decision until *I* had consented to accept *him.* He said he should have made me the offer long before if he had seen any chance of preferment; that I had filled the void in his home and heart left when his dear mother died. I am sure, Euretta, you will not blame me for accepting him. You know what a noble, true, unselfish man he is; how pure and true a Christian, but you cannot know, my dear, the spoiled, selfish, unreasoning creature I was before I was cast helpless on his compassionate care; or all the change wrought in me by his teaching and example, and that of our blind friend, Mr Ashurst.

"We are to be married here next month by the incoming vicar, and hope you will be present. Indeed, it is the desire both of Mr Ughtred and myself that you should resign your situation, and live with us at the rectory. I need not tell you how good a father he will be to you, after all the experience of his watchful care you have had.

"It will please you to learn that there is a new organ at St Mildred's, and Mr

Ashurst goes with us as organist. He has refused several engagements as a violinist at London concerts, because they would either take him away from his good old wife, or drag her about into society for which she is unfitted. He says she married him in his poverty and helplessness, when he had neither home nor friends, and has helped him to make both; he would rather break his fiddle than neglect her, either for the pleasure of others or the profit he might make.

"The rector of St Peter's has allowed him the use of the organ for practice, and Mr Spencer has been helping to freshen up his long-neglected talent. I hear that he played an organ in Canterbury when he was young, riding into the city from his farm for the purpose.

"We shall miss Dr Manningham and his snuff-box at St Mildred's, but we cannot have all our friends with us. I hope, my dear daughter, we shall at least have you. Mr Ughtred joins me in thanking Miss Ainslie for all her kindness, and

trusts she will not object to part with you under the present circumstances, to share the future home and happiness of—Your affectionate mother,

"MARGARET FLEMING."

Miss Ainslie noted the varying emotions flitting like lights and shadows over Euretta's expressive face as she read and re-read the missive so full of exceptional interest for her; the shadows coming on at the close.

"I hope you have no ill news there?" said Miss Ainslie at length.

"Well," replied Euretta, with a curious smile, "I suppose I ought to rejoice, for my mother's sake, her troubles have led only to peace and serenity. She needed a strong arm to lean on, and she has found it. I am doubtful only as it affects myself. But, you had better read the letter, and judge."

The rays of the morning sun fell through the broad mullioned window on the silvery curls and lappets, and the tall

thin figure of the maiden lady, as, seated in the high-backed oaken chair, cushioned for modern use, she took the letter from her companion's hand, and scanned it carefully.

Until she had read every word she made no comment. The letter contained news for her of which Euretta had no consciousness. All that related to Will Ashurst touched memories sealed from the ken of those among whom she lived and moved.

At length she said, "You approve this marriage?"

"Undoubtedly. It will restore my mother to her true position, and bless her life with the love and support of as good a man as walks the earth, I care not where the other may be," answered Euretta proudly, as she stood before the questioner, with the light full on the rolls of dark-brown hair, which set off, like a coronal, her oval, well-formed face, on the crochet collar above the full bodice of her dark cashmere dress, and the pink silk bow at her throat.

"But about yourself? Your mother desires to have you with her. It is only natural. What have you to say?" And Miss Ainslie paused for a reply; with no intimation of her own desires or regrets.

"Would you like me to leave you, Miss Ainslie?" questioned Euretta in turn.

"Certainly not, my dear. You have brightened up the Holt wonderfully. I should be very lonely indeed now were you to go away. I should miss your youthful face, your song, your footfall, your look and touch of sympathy in my sadness."

The reply was prompt.

"There needs no other answer. My mother will have her husband; she will not miss me. I should not feel at home with them as I do here with you, in this fine old place. You have been so much more of a kind friend to me than a mistress, that for the first time in my life I have realised all my mother lost, when she quitted her father's home; and what our position should have been, ay, and will be yet if dreams come true." And Euretta's

eyes looked through the glass at something that was neither grassy lawn nor gravelled drive, nor the long vista of tall trees just wakening into life.

Miss Ainslie looked up, pleased and puzzled.

"My dear, you are speaking in enigmas, and not for the first time. This letter only adds to the perplexity. I am well aware that love overlooks disparity of rank or position"—a faint flush tinged the speaker's brow, beneath the crisp white curls. Had not she overlooked it? "But the Rev. Austin Ughtred is of ancient race and lineage. Can it be that Mrs Bemerton was mistaken in saying that your mother was a seamstress, when she offered you a situation about three years ago? And what is all this about dreaming?"

It was Euretta's turn to flush. She sat down within the shade of the crimson-velvet curtain. But she answered steadily,—

She was "*not* mistaken. My mother *was then* a seamstress; but she was also the widow of a brave sea-captain, and the

daughter of a *very* rich merchant in London, who cast her off because she went to sea with her husband instead of staying on land with him. When his ship was wrecked, and we only were saved, mother and Mr Ughtred both wrote to my grandfather, but he was still unforgiving. Mr Ughtred made another attempt to move him before I went to teach the little Ryes, but to no purpose. Stay, I must not say that, for since then bank-notes have come to my mother in blank covers every few months; and I think he must be relenting. Indeed, it is a dream of mine that some day grandfather will call her back to him, and own us both."

Miss Ainslie noted that Euretta did not name her grandfather, and delicately forbore to inquire. She did not know that the omission was more accidental than premeditated.

"So then Mr Ughtred only restores your mother to a position she had lost?" she said; and Euretta having bowed assent, she added, after a pause, "and about yourself?"

"Well, Miss Ainslie, with your permission I will go to Sandwich for my mother's marriage; but I will come back and stay with you until you are tired of me, or my own dream comes true."

"Your *own* dream? About your grandfather do you mean?"

"No, Miss Ainslie, *that* is more of a conviction than a dream, and yet it arises out of a dream I had whilst I lived at the Black Mill. I hope you will not laugh at me, because I believe the dream will come true, for I have dreamed the same many times since then, and with never a variation."

A smile flickered on Miss Ainslie's lips, though she answered with sufficient gravity, "No; I will not laugh. I have heard so much indirectly of your dreams and dreaming, I should really like to know what it all means."

"Well," answered Euretta, with her eyes still fixed on the unseen distance, and in the tone of one who tells a well-conned tale, "when I was living at the Black Mill, I

dreamed I was going to be married, and was driven to church in my own grandfather's carriage, from a large house with trees before it that was his. We drove a long distance through wide thoroughfares of handsome houses, with gardens in front, and through streets of shops—so large, I never saw the like—to a church with a wide, long flight of steps and a high-pillared portico, like a Grecian temple. And before we got there I saw the steeple rising at the side, something like a pyramid, crowned with a Roman or Grecian statue. The pyramid itself rose from a tower, with little pillars around it. And it was at the *side* of the church, not the end, which I thought curious. Then I thought I was dressed in white satin, even to my shoes; and, instead of a bonnet, wore a white lace veil, and a wreath of pure white flowers, and that I had upon my arms and neck resplendent jewels of pearls and diamonds, and on my breast a pendant, shaped like a heart, all of one bright red stone, set round with pearls."

Miss Ainslie gave a slight start,—

"And your bracelets?" asked she, curiously.

"They had clasps to match the pendant."

"Oh, heart-shaped carbuncles, set round with pearls?" queried the elder.

"They might be carbuncles; I do not know."

"Did you never see trinkets like those?"

"Never, except in my dream. Mrs Bemerton had nothing like them."

"No; but Paul's mother had," flashed through Miss Ainslie's mind. She kept the thought to herself, but she listened with a difference. The jewels had given a new import to the dreamer's narrative. "Who was with you in the carriage?"

"Oh, my mother, in a dove-coloured satin, and her father, an old gentleman, with gold spectacles and silvery hair; and he held her hand in his, as something too precious to release."

"And the bridegroom?"

He was waiting with some other gentlemen at the top of the steps. He was a tall,

fine man, with a bronzed face, and a great, nut-brown beard, and the most steadfast brown eyes I ever saw. He did not seem to be more than thirty, though he had so large a beard. But the strangest thing was his dress. He wore cherry-coloured trousers, and *two* jackets—absolutely two dark-blue jackets, laced over with gold cord, and the one hung loose upon his shoulder, like a mantle over the other. I never saw such a thing. And his cap was just as curious, like a red coffee-bag hanging out of a black muff."

"Did you never see an officer in such a uniform?" was asked, half incredulously.

"An officer's uniform! Oh! was it?" said Euretta spontaneously,—"then that clears it up. That was the only fantastic thing about my dream. I thought he must be a foreigner by the dress and beard. Well, Miss Ainslie, if ever I see that man I shall know him, whatever he may wear; I have dreamed of him so frequently. Dreamed that he had helped to restore mother and me to our relatives

and our rights, and that I loved him dearly. I told no one, lest I should be laughed at for my folly; but it was my love for my dream-bridegroom set me studying, in every spare moment, how to acquit myself in the sphere to which he clearly belonged. Literature, music, manners, had to be cultivated. The little sets of china were not bought for child's play, Miss Ainslie. In my private hours I played the hostess, copying what I had seen when I helped the housekeeper at Stonar, and at Mrs Bemerton's. My mother never forgot she was a lady, at any time; and perhaps it came easier to me. At all events, if my dream does not become a reality (though I feel assured it will some day), I have been a gainer by it, if only in my introduction to you."

"Thank you, my dear," said Miss Ainslie, pressing her hand; "I feel the delicate compliment. So far, your singular dream has done no harm; but I would advise you not to indulge in any morbid sentiment for what may only be a freak of

memory or imagination. In the first place, the church with a tower at the *side*, is an absurdity, and no English officer would be allowed to wear a beard. That is equally absurd. But dreams are merely vagaries of memory. You may, at some time of your life, have seen the regimentals at Deal or Sandwich, and unconsciously reproduced them in your sleep; and as for the jewels—well, I confess that *is* singular." But she did not say *why*.

CHAPTER XIII.

FULFILMENT.

ALMOST simultaneously with the arrival of Mrs Fleming's letter at Ainslie Holt, Mrs Norreys welcomed a long-looked-for communication from her son Cecil. She tore it open eagerly, but as she read, her first delight gave way to sickening apprehension.

"HOSPITAL, SCUTARI,
"*February* 1853.

"MY DEAR MOTHER,—I dare say you think it is a confounded long while since you heard from me, but you may thank God your son is alive, or has a finger to

hold a pen. I've had a harder fight for it here than we had at Balaclava, and no mistake; and that brave fellow, Ainslie, is pretty nearly in the same boat. I suppose you've read all about the battles in the papers, so I need not waste any strength or ink on them, for they are both scarce articles. You will have heard what a gallant dash Ainslie made to rescue me when I was awfully wounded, and almost dropping from my horse. It was the pluckiest thing imaginable. The yelling demons were all around me, thrusting, slashing, pistoling. He rode them down, caught me falling, and fought his way back with the head of a Cossack lance in his own thigh! That he should do it for *me* was the noblest thing of all, for I had done him many an ill turn, and he knew it. Even as a lad I crowed over him. Let no one say a word against him in my hearing again! He carried me to the doctors and waited, with the lance-head in his thigh, till I was examined, before he would have his own wound

dressed! I was told this, for I remembered nothing until I found myself in our field-hospital minus a leg and my left arm; a mass of plaister and bandages. Ainslie —they have made him a major, I am told —would not stay in hospital a second day, but went back to duty with his wound plugged up and plaistered. Then on the 5th November came Inkerman, and, with his wound all unhealed, he rode through the foe with a remnant of our Light Brigade into another valley of slaughter.

"When all was over and the victory ours, Ainslie was found lying by the side of his dead charger, and brought into hospital. He might have been a target for shot and shell, poor fellow! One bullet had gone clean through his chest and out at his back. Our surgeon thought he was done for, but he is better than I am now, for he is neither maimed nor disfigured. He lay aside me, probed and plugged, and strapped, and was like myself doing fairly well, when a hurricane swooped down upon us, carrying away tent, blankets, and every

mortal thing that could screen or shelter us. The rain was as pitiless as the blast, and what the storms of the Crimea could be to wounded men is past telling. How we lived through it all is a miracle. I heard that Lord Raglan sat up to his knees in mud, his tent—nowhere. The Russian sleet killed as surely as the Russian guns. Yet Ainslie and I survived to be draughted to Scutari.

"Fancy the horrors of that voyage across the stormy Black Sea to badly wounded men, in a vessel loaded with sick and wounded! It was horrible to us; what must it have been to the privates lying crowded together in rows on the open deck? And the hospital at Scutari was not much better. It was so full that we had to be laid in one of the corridors, lucky in having a mattrass between our bodies and the cold, damp, tiled floor. We officers fared little better than the men. And until Miss Nightingale came, there was neither order, nor comfort, nor decency; towels, spoons, cans, clothes, and all decent appliances were wanting.

"Kits and baggage had been left unclaimed, or lay on the quay, at the mercy of plunderers. Men died and were buried, whose very names were unknown. We were fortunate in securing the attention of a young fellow, a recruit from the Kentish Militia, who had been seized with cholera on landing, and been left behind. He was still weak, but handy and willing, and I believe Ainslie owes his life to Dan Rye's care of him as a countryman. We owe the young fellow something more, for he has helped us to a discovery Uncle Copeland would give all he is worth to know. He hunted up our baggage on the quay, and on turning over Ainslie's traps for a clean shirt, out tumbled a miniature; one of the loveliest girl faces I ever set eyes on. I saw Ainslie's countenance change, but I thought Dan had lost his wits. He held it at arm's-length, and cried,—'Why, Captain, where did you get that? It's our Hetty!' and then the poor chap propped on the damp floor and fairly sobbed over it. He had fought his own

brother, left home and enlisted, all on account of the girl. And the captain, ill as he was, seemed as crazy to get hold of the picture, and to know who she was. *He* had fallen in love with a face only seen once, or with the picture. And who think you she is? Who, but my own cousin, Euretta Fleming!! Cousin Margaret and her child were *not* drowned. Tell uncle they are living at Sandwich! The picture was taken by Pierce Hatherage, who is with our army. Dan rejoined his regiment a month ago; and both Ainslie and I may be expected home ere long—invalided. . . . . ."

There were a few other unimportant items, but they and the signature might have been blank for all the heed Mrs Norreys paid to them.

What did all her secret scheming to remove the vicar of St Mary's avail, if Cecil came home full of his discovery, to bring disgrace on her head and blight all their hopes. How many pictures were there of

the girl? They seemed to multiply like mushrooms, and her danger with them! Could nothing be done to avert the impending catastrophe?

Surely her pillow was neither of roses nor poppies that week. She had made it for herself, whatever it might be. But that did not make it the softer or more composing.

When the Rev. Austin Ughtred and his still pretty wife Margaret were on their way to St Mildred's Rectory, accompanied by William Ashurst and his homely wife, who were to occupy a charming cottage close beside, Euretta had only to say farewell to the Ryes and the Manninghams, before hastening back to Ainslie Holt. She had heard all there was to tell of the ancient flint church, and the charming rectory covered with ivy; and of the home of the Ashursts close beside; and of the harvest the blind musician expected to reap in the adjacent flourishing watering-place. She had done her best to comfort Mrs Rye for the departure of her son

Dan, and shaken hands with the good doctor; and then Sandwich was left behind.

She went back to her duties, rejoicing in the serene happiness of her mother and her old friends, and picturing in her mind's eye the homes to which they had gone. Never was self or her own future less in her mind.

Miss Ainslie had found her way to Canterbury in the carriage instead of sending the phaeton to meet Euretta. She had been away three weeks, and in the interim the trees donned their robes of April's tenderest green. Showers of laburnum-gold overhung the hedgerows; young hops were climbing up their poles ambitiously, birds were twittering and singing on the boughs, and all things seemed to rejoice in the freshness of new hopes.

The lodge-keeper stood at the already open gates, and as they passed through, cried out excitedly,—

"Theer's Captain Norreys and another

officer come from Dover with news of the master!" and then, through some private understanding with the old coachman or his whip, the horses seemed to fly along the green avenue.

They had a glimpse of strange faces at a window; of servants on the steps, and in the hall, where everyone had an air of unwonted excitement.

"Come with me, I feel faint," was Miss Ainslie's low-voiced request to Euretta, as she clung to her arm for support, fearing —she knew not what.

The strangers had evidently watched them alight. As they entered the drawing-room to their left, the two men turned from the great mullioned window to salute them. The light was full on the faces of all. And what saw they?

Two bearded men, in wofully shabby and dilapidated hussar uniforms, the one with his arm in a sling, and a stick to support his steps; the other with an empty sleeve and a wooden substitute for a leg; both pale and emaciated.

But why do the two men stand amazed, and turn as if to question each other's eyes?

And why does Euretta's head swim, and her cheek pale? Does she wonder which of these is Captain Norreys? For there before her stands the bearded bridegroom of her dreams!

A supreme effort, and she is apparently herself again. But Miss Ainslie has felt her companion start, and her arm tremble, and the quick change of Euretta's countenance is not lost on her, any more than the sudden movement of the two men.

She herself stands all but motionless, only a slight movement of head and eyes from one to another betrays bewilderment, and an effort to recognise Captain Norreys in either of the bearded strangers before her.

"Aunt Alicia! do you not know me?" cries the one with the stick, advancing; and in another moment Miss Ainslie's arms are round her nephew's neck, and Euretta knows once for all that her dream-husband was Major Ainslie.

Ere Miss Ainslie's agitation had time to subside, or she could shake hands with Captain Norreys, her nephew whispered in her ear,—

"Who is your young friend? Introduce us."

As the words "Miss Euretta Fleming" left her lips, the two invalided officers again exchanged glances.

"Good heavens! I knew it!" exclaimed the major, with strange emotion; "this must be the finger of God! Miss Fleming, have you any relations named Norreys?"

"Yes, Major Ainslie" (how sweet his name seemed to sound from her lips!); "I have an aunt and some cousins, but my grandfather discarded my mother, and they all refuse to acknowledge us."

"All?" echoed Captain Norreys. "Nay, *I* am ready to claim you as my cousin Fleming"—he put out his only hand to meets hers. "And there must be surely some mistake; Uncle Copeland does not know he has a daughter or a grandchild

living. The great grief of his life is the belief that both perished in the wreck of the *Euretta.*

"There is no mistake. The letter Aunt Norreys wrote, when my mother lay ill and helpless after the shipwreck, casting off all ties, the vicar of St Mary's carried to London, and laid before Mr Martin Norreys, and he only confirmed it."

The maimed officer looked incredulous.

"What! Martin? my brother Martin? It is impossible!"

"It is true, sir."

"Then must it be searched into. There is some mistake somewhere. I must hasten to London, and set the matter at rest. Martin could not lend himself to cruelty or dishonour. And that letter must be a forgery."

The Ainslies had listened with strong interest. Questions and answers followed quickly, but when Dan Rye's revelation was referred to, there seemed some reticence as to the primary cause.

Neither the major nor the captain said a

word about the portrait over which the private had wept so sorely; or of the rapid promotion it was likely to bring to Dan.

It was not until a couple of weeks had flown, and Captain Norreys was on his way to London to dispel what was to him a mystery, that Major Ainslie took occasion to ask Euretta, whose bewildered movements he had followed with voiceless adoration,—

"Do you remember at any time standing on a drawbridge whilst your portrait was surreptitiously sketched?"

The crimson mounted to her forehead as she answered indignantly,—

"I can never forget the impertinence. A well-dressed lady would have been spared the indignity offered to the poverty of my appearance."

"Can you never forgive it, Miss Fleming? Artists study only the picturesque and beautiful; he took a picture—and a face. See, it is here," and he drew a miniature from his breast. "Pierce Hather-

sage little foresaw all the consequences of his impromptu sketch. The face fascinated me. I scarcely dared ask myself what was the class of the original. I saw only a pure, sweet countenance, filled with dreams of something higher than her lot. It has been my constant companion for three years. I had grown to love it as an ideal, and determined to seek out the original if I lived to return, little thinking that my wounds and helplessness would bring me into contact with Dan Rye, or the clue he held to your identity. We travel ways unknown to all but God, to the very haven of our rest. Little thought either Norreys or myself, as we lay helpless with but a mattress between our aching bodies and the cold, damp tiles at Scutari, that our very wounds and hardships were bringing us nearer to such a discovery; he of a long-lost cousin, I of a long sought—*love*." His voice had sunk low, but the tender tones had reached her heart through the small shell-like ear bent so low. There was a slight change in his manner, but

he was not less earnest as he went on, after a momentary pause, during which her hand was taken prisoner,—"Miss Fleming, I am not very presentable just at present, have brought home a great Russian beard, and have an hospital savour about me; but if you can overlook these blemishes, and take pity on one who has cherished your painted semblance without a hope of finding the original, you will do more to restore me to health and society than all the surgeons in England."

Do I need to tell how she answered this lover of her dreams, or how, in spite of his bushy beard, his lips found hers?

Do I need to tell how differently the brother-officer was received by Martin Copeland and the Norreys, mother and son?

On the two latter, the shame and the exposure fell crushingly. Mrs Norreys had one of her old attacks, but though she lingered, she never rallied.

Those she had injured she never lived to see. It was the sorest punishment

that her own son should have exposed her.

Martin Norreys, who had held his head so high in the commercial and social world, as a man of undoubted integrity, was, if possible, still more deeply affected. He would not have wronged a human being, and had all along been sensitively alive to the wrong done alike to his good uncle and those he mourned as lost. He was not altogether sorry to see it righted, at any cost. In extenuation of his own complicity, he could but plead his own dilemma, and urge that he had sent back fifty pounds in the very letter that had wrought the woe, and followed it with other notes from time to time. And surely enough the fifty-pound note was found stowed away in the rector's escritoire when the aunt's letter was brought forth again as a testimony against the writer. These notes, and an investment privately made in the name of Euretta Fleming, saved the merchant cousin from sharing to the full his mother's disgrace.

Euretta's dream came true in the autumn. She wore as a bride the jewels of Paul Ainslie's mother, and Miss Ainslie clasped them proudly on her neck and arms. And when Martin Copeland insisted on the marriage being solemnised in the church where her mother and he himself had been married, the long drive from Kensington to St George's, Bloomsbury, was no revelation to her. The very edifice had been prefigured. "By many Ways Unknown" had father and daughter come together, and the bridegroom found his bride—a bride who had made it so long her study to fill the higher place appointed for her.

The Holt had never fairer or fitter mistress, never one more beloved. And there was never more welcome guest under its roof than the artist Pierce Hathersage, when he too came back from the Crimea with a beard a foot long. If the picture painted on Sandwich Bridge had not made his fortune, it had gone a long way towards it.

OLD ELSPA.

I WAS alone in the world—or I thought I was, which amounted to pretty much the same in its mental and moral effects. My mother died when I was so young that I had only a shadowy remembrance of a pale face, and a long, last clasp to her loving heart. I had been my father's pet and darling, and now he was dead too, and his will had assigned me, just like a bale of goods, to the care and guardianship of his brother, a doctor, whose home lay amongst the picturesque mountains of Cumberland.

I was "too impulsive," said the will, and would throw myself and my money away before I knew the value of either, if I had no one to take care of me; and so when my poor father died in the south of France, where we had gone to winter, Uncle Ritson, who came barely in time to lay him in his foreign grave, carried me off at once to his house on the bleak hillside, gave me a kiss as he lifted me out of the stuffy vehicle which had conveyed us from the station, presented me to my aunt and cousins with a "Well, here's Adela!" and told me to consider myself at home.

It was the beginning of January, intensely cold. The sudden change from a warmer climate had sensibly affected me; I was chilled under all my furs, and perhaps more chilled by the restraining influence of my father's will, having pondered the "too impulsive" all through the journey.

Certainly I was not "too impulsive" on my entrance to my new "home."

Aunt and cousins had met me on the threshold with warm welcomes, pressed

to remove my wraps and to make me comfortable. There was a huge fire blazing on the hearth, a tea-table piled with north-country luxuries, and all that should have made me feel at home; but something was wanting, and instead of responding to their greetings in my own natural fashion, I dropped into a seat, after the first glance round, and covering my face with my hands, burst into tears.

I have small, thin, quick ears. I overheard Aunt Ritson whisper to Bella and Winnie, as she drew them back,—

"Hush, it's but natural, poor bairn; leave your cousin alone, lasses; she will come to herself all the sooner."

And I did come to myself; but whether my tears had fallen frostily on their hot hearth, or we travellers had brought a chill in with us, or my own manner did not invite effusion, a certain air of restraint seemed to grow upon us; and when I was shown to the room set apart for me, and left in its privacy, I flung myself on the bed and sobbed in passionate grief for my

dead father, declaring that I was "alone in the world, utterly alone."

This feeling grew upon me. Looking back, I am conscious that it was much my own fault; that I had not responded with sufficient warmth and gratitude to the relatives who had made room in their household for one they had not seen since she was a baby, and yet had met with open arms and hearts.

They had heard that I was gushing and exuberant, a creature of impulse, and finding me reserved, and languid, concluded that I, accustomed to elegance and luxury, could not brook the homeliness and retirement of my new life. I was rich, and they were not. They mistook my morbid melancholy for pride, and ceased to press their society or attentions on me, lest I should attribute to them mercenary motives.

I see it all now; but then I was blind.

There was another grief at my heart besides sorrow for my dead parent; and, I fear, whenever my thoughts flew to that

lonely grave among the Pyrenees, I questioned the policy which had isolated me from the world—the world in which my hero lived and moved, — and had prisoned my free soul amongst those unresponsive walls of stone.

In this rhapsody I did not apostrophise alone the four walls of the solid stone house that, set against the mountain-side with a background of pine, larch and mountain ash, looked so cold and grey, staring with its many lidless eyes from its rocky perch above the straggling lake-village, on the steep unguarded roadway in front, and the narrow strips of garden ground stretching like green arms on either side.

No; I held converse with the mountains. They were to me the barriers between love, and life, and happiness, but it was only on their solitary heights I felt free to give the feeling utterance.

The thrifty household ways of my aunt and cousins, which kept them ever busy, were strange to me. My dainty fingers

had no acquaintance with rolling-pin or paste-board. It was not I who kept so bright the mirror in which I saw my own beauty, ay, and my own unhappiness reflected. I was supposed to be mourning, and, with mistaken delicacy, was left to do only what I pleased, and that was—nothing.

Had Uncle Ritson known it, or how I spent my time, he would have shaken me up like a bottle of physic ; and I should have been the better for it. But whether on foot, or horseback, or in his ancient gig, he was off in a morning, and frequently was absent all the day. His patients were scattered, and his rounds extended.

I, having no occupation for hands or energies, feeling myself something apart from the rest, was myself off and away up the breezy hillside to the lovely margin of the lake, or into the most secluded glens, my only companion being my faithful dog ; and there, where there was only the wind to answer me, I poured forth all

the pent-up feelings of my heart; and oft my gusts of passionate emotion found utterance in song. At times I took a pencil and sketch-book with me in these wanderings; but there was ever one figure in the foreground of the most picturesque scene, and often enough the figure was there alone, the adjuncts all forgotten.

At first Bella or Winnie had borne me company; but I think they saw my longing to be alone; and I had my way, not without many cautions from my aunt. What were perils to me, chafing against the restraint of my father's will, crying from the depths of my inmost heart for the banished love who would never find me in those solitudes, and longing for wings to traverse land and sea until I found my home on his faithful bosom?

Lost in abstraction, all dangers were forgotten, and I had nearly paid the penalty but for a guardian angel little dreamed off.

My first peril was from the mountain

mist, which came down and around me with bewildering suddenness, blotting out the landscape far and near. Still I thought I knew the way, and was stepping onwards, though with caution, when my dress was clutched from behind, as I fancied, by some bush. Turning to disentangle it, I was confronted with what seemed an awful apparition looming through the misty veil, and, with a suppressed cry, I stood still in affright.

I saw a woman's form, bent with age; a face intersected with lines and wrinkles, like a map, from which nose and chin stood out like mountain-peaks, and where the sunken eyes gleamed like the fiery depths of two volcanic craters.

"Stop, my leddy!" she cried; "the gates of death are open before ye! Tak' my hand, and let me lead you; and thank God, my bairn, that Elspa was near you in your peril."

I had heard of Elspa as a woman who dealt in herbs and simples; but I had also heard of her as one with an uncanny repu-

tation. She was spoken of as "the wise woman," but the words were uttered as if they meant "witch."

I confess I was half-afraid to accept her guidance; but she stamped her foot, and by gesture strong as words gave me to understand I had been walking towards a precipice, and three steps further would have borne me to destruction.

What landmark she had, I know not; but I think she seemed to feel her way with her feet. At all events, after about an hour's cautious stepping, we stood below the mist, the blue lake gleaming like a mirror still further down, and my uncle's house within sight. Conscious of the service she had rendered, I did not confine my thanks to words, but was liberal with my coin.

As she took 'the siller,' she scanned my face curiously, then seized my hand, and peered into it closely, whilst a sort of creepy sensation (excusable in a girl of nineteen) stole over me.

"Once, twice, thrice! Three perils, my

bonnie leddy. One is past; the ithers lie before. Perils of your ain seeking. The gates of death stand in the path of your true love. Open them not with rash or heedless hands before the year be out, or love may mourn for love that couldna bide. The air of mountain and of lake is na gude for ye, bairn. Keep mair at hame, and dinna be misdoubtin'. There's a gude God aboon a'! Remember, one danger is overpast. Tak' heed ye seek not the ithers; and dinna scoff at old Elspa's warning words.'

The old woman trotted off with her basket on her arm, a rusty black bonnet on her head, garments poor but clean, and only a small check woollen handkerchief to protect her from the chilly mountain mists.

I had scarcely decided whether to laugh at her maunderings, or to yield to the superstitious feeling she had awakened, when I opened the house door, to find all in a state of excitement.

It was long past our dinner hour, and my absence had alarmed them. Of course

I explained the cause of my delay; and it was only by Aunt Ritson's agitation that I fully comprehended the danger I had escaped. I think her motherly concern made me more communicative than usual. We were still speaking of Elspa when my uncle came in.

"Ah!" said he, as Winnie helped him off with his overcoat, "ah! my dear, you might thank your stars Elspa was on the mountain side. I daresay she had followed you. The old Scotchwoman is shrewd and far-seeing. She has turned her eighty years' experience to account; has a good practical knowledge of common ailments and curative simples. I should lose my own credit, or I might do worse than take her as an assistant," and he laughed. "Then she can read character with any physiognomist in the world, and the silly folk think her prophetic, when she is only clear-eyed."

I think uncle was using an invisible probe. I know I coloured, and he laughed again, but said nothing more—nor did I.

The excitement had not all been on my

account. Bella had received an invitation to spend some months with a newly-married friend in London, and good-natured Winnie was in high glee. Even aunt acknowledged it was a chance not to be missed, if possible; and I saw her glance furtively in Uncle Ritson's face, which I fancied was graver than usual. Still, possibilities were not discussed in my presence. It was not until I had retired to my pretty room for the night that I overheard the sisters discussing the problem, unmindful of the thin partition between the head of my bed and theirs.

I found that money—or its scarcity—stood in the way, and heard the chances of the matrimonial market calculated with a balance greatly in favour of London. Money! How I hated the word! I would have given every shilling I had, to be assured that Edgar Neville was true to me, and would seek me out when the period of probation prescribed by my father was gone by. But where could he seek for me? Correspondence had been forbidden. He knew not my address,

and my father had withheld Edgar's from me. Ah! how he repented before he died! How glad he would then have been to leave me in those strong protective arms!

I soon bridged the monetary difficulty over in spite of uncle's opposition, and I think I showed something of my old self in the spirit with which I entered into the needful preparations for Miss Ritson's launch on the sea of London society, little thinking what might be its import to myself.

It was May when she went. I had suggested that she should lighten her mourning, being about to visit a bride—a hint she seemed glad to take, for her pretty lavender bonnet set off her face much better than her heavy crape. She had kissed me very heartily before she got into the gig beside her father to be driven to the station, to which her boxes had already been despatched, and I felt more satisfied with myself than I had done since I had crossed the Cumberland border.

Letters filled with the wonders she had

seen, and the places she had visited, broke up the monotony of our lives. Then came one from Hastings, in which she told of her introduction to a Mr Neville.

I think my pulse stopped as Winnie read out the name. I know aunt asked me if I was ill—if the heat was too much for me. But I drew myself together, said "nothing" was the matter, and tried to convince myself the name was a common one.

Again and again we heard of this same Mr Neville, and my heart began to be torn with doubts and suspicions, and a very demon of jealousy seemed to take possession of my breast. I felt assured that Bella was in love with him, and that he was the Edgar Neville of my adoration; all that she stated of his appearance and family were convincing.

At length a letter came, addressed in a manly hand to Uncle Ritson, with Edgar's well-known crest upon the seal. It was a proposal for my cousin's hand.

My head swam round, but I mustered courage to ask Mr Neville's Christian

name. He had "merely signed J. E. Neville." "Ah, that was it, sure enough —John Edgar!" prompted some taunting fiend. I had my back towards my uncle, standing in the doorway, as I asked. No one noticed how I staggered into the hall, or how I snatched my hat from the stand and darted up the mountain-side to cool my fevered brow and still my throbbing pulses. How I went or where I went I could never remember; I have some recollection of falling as I bounded across a beck, of old Elspa's face bending over me, and then no more, until I found myself in my own snowy bed, with Winnie watching me, and an array of physic bottles on the window seat.

Elspa had found me where I had fallen, half-in, half-out of the stream. Unable to drag me thence, she had summoned help with a peculiar whistle she kept suspended to her girdle, the shrill note of which no shepherd dared to disobey.

It brought a couple of shepherds to the spot. My limbs were lifted out of the

stream—she had already bathed my brow, and plaistered up my temple—and then I was carried slowly down to interrupt the answer Uncle Ritson was sending to Bella and Mr Neville.

My fall and the immersion were accredited with the long fever which almost baffled my good uncle's skill. If anyone suspected otherwise it was old Elspa, but she was too "wise" to revert to the subject when she came to see me ere my convalescence.

Very slow was my recovery, retarded no doubt by the scraps Winnie read to me as *pleasant news* from her sister's letters. It was now "Eddie" this, or "Eddie" that, and as I shut my eyes and ground my teeth, the better to endure, I felt indignant that my noble-fronted Edgar should have a pet name like a baby. To me he had the majesty of a monarch. How could she address him so?

I was downstairs before the Christmas came, able and willing to assist my aunt in her multitudinous preparations, and

tried to smile and look gratified during the Christmas merry-making. I had heard, but scarcely seemed to realise, that Bella was to be married early in the new year, and that she and her husband would come to spend the honeymoon with us, and I was doing my best to nerve myself for the meeting.

The old year was closing in. Elspa—who else?—came up to the house with a letter she had found lying in a by-road. It should have been delivered some days previously; and it was supposed that the postman had taken more to drink than was good for him during the Christmas "cairdings," and dropped it by the way.

Goodness! how that letter stunned me! Bella was by that time married. She and her husband were to be with us on New Year's Day, and they should bring with them a New Year's gift for cousin Adela, as a thank-offering for bringing them together. Their photographs were enclosed.

I saw only the one. Yes, it was Edgar's! There was no mistake.

The house was at once in a bustle of pre-

paration. Again I slipped out, to hide my agony and prepare myself for the coming trial.

Dreamily I went along. I saw nothing before me but that meeting on the morrow and the revelation it was sure to bring. My mind seemed a chaos, in which thought was lost.

All at once—for I had taken no note of my path—I found myself on the reedy margin of the lake, as the silver circle of the moon was rising above the mountain-tops. And there I stood, looking on the dark waters, whilst something seemed to whisper to me that *there* was peace; that I need not meet the proud bride and my inconstant love unless I chose; that I might hide my sorrows and my secret there, and none be the wiser.

My foot was on the brink. There was a step on the stones behind me. I turned, and I think my half-formed purpose was visible in my face, as I once more confronted old Elspa, weird and witch-like in the moonlight, a warning finger held up.

Sharp were her words, sharp as my need. She bade me go down on my knees, and thank God that He had sent her to save me from my third peril—the peril of body and soul. What was I puling over? What right had I to fling away the life that was given for the service of others? How dared I tempt death, loving the creature more than the Creator. She had heard me raving to the winds when I thought myself alone, and had kept a watch upon me. And she bade me go back home, and pray to be forgiven, and to "trust the Lord to make His dark ways plain."

She took me by the hand, and led me back like a penitent child; said to my aunt that she thought I was not well, and, by her leave, would watch me through the night. Something she gave me too, and I slept.

When I awoke a chaise was at the gate; and before I could fasten my dress with my trembling fingers, Bella had burst in, radiant with happiness, and flung her arms around me.

"Come, Adela, make haste!" said she. "Edward is all impatience to see you, and show you our New Year's gift."

"Edward!" I gasped.

"Yes, my dear, Edward! Did you not know his name?"

It was all a tangle. I followed her to the living-room below, where the great holly-bush was hanging, and there stood a stranger, who was introduced to me as James Edward Neville, my new cousin—and surely there also stood Edgar, my own Edgar; for he held out his arms, and caught me as I was falling.

He had been best man at his cousin's wedding, and Bella had only seen him a few days previously. The postman must have lost another letter, one Edgar had sent to me. There were two photographs sent; and by some mischance had been placed in the wrong envelopes. No doubt if the other lost letter were recovered, Edward's portrait would come to light.

Old Elspa kept my secret well. Better than I deserved. But I never forgot the

lesson she had taught me. And when Edgar carried me away from Cumberland as proud a wife as Bella, we took good care of old Elspa for the rest of her days.

BESSY AND OTHERS:

LEAVES FROM A LIFE HISTORY.

CHAPTER I.

THE FARM.

"I CANNOT stand this, mother; I shall have to leave home and go to service," said Elizabeth Birch, with an air of sudden determination; and anyone scanning her grave and thoughtful countenance might see that though the an

nouncement was sudden, it had been weighed and deliberated long beforehand.

"Then, if you go, I go!" put in her younger sister Sarah, with a toss of her head; "I don't think home is any more desirable for me than for you, and it will be worse when you are gone. Besides, I am tired of this humdrum village, where everybody knows everybody else's business; and the rector's wife thinks it her business to lecture one on the smallest provocation;" and as she spoke Sarah swept the fragments of a broken cup and saucer from the hearth, and prepared to remove the tea things.

"Nay, Sarah; you had better stay and be a comfort to mother. You are too young to leave home, and have not my reasons," remonstrated her sister, who stood, bonnet in hand, by the open window.

"My girls," said the mother—a quiet little woman, in a printed cotton gown, as clean and neat, save for a recent stain, as if fresh from the wash, though half a week's work had been done in it. "My girls,"

she repeated, with a troubled countenance, "don't be rash! Do think twice before you talk of leaving home. Things may not be very pleasant here; but do you dream that everything runs smoothly elsewhere? You will not find strangers more angelic than the people at home, and—"

"Not than yourself, dear mother!" cried Elizabeth, flinging herself on the breast of her good parent; "I know that, but I may escape the pain of seeing ill-usage I am powerless to prevent; and I *must* go, mother, for if I saw my father raise his hand to strike you again, as he did this afternoon, my temper would get the better of me, and I should do him some mischief which I might repent to the end of my days; then, I should not be taunted with idleness, and"—here her voice sank to a whisper—"I should be less likely to fret about Tom, away from Kitknoll."

A warm tear fell on the girl's forehead as, locked in close embrace, she knelt at her mother's feet on the red-tiled kitchen

floor. Sighing heavily, Mrs Birch assented, sadly,—

"Well, Elizabeth, perhaps you are right. I have seen the curb you put upon your strong temper, and you are best away from temptation, for you might not always be able to restrain yourself; and, my girl, you may, perhaps, forget Tom amid fresh scenes."

"Nay, nay; I shall never forget him, but I can bear my trouble better among strangers."

"Then is *all* really over between you?"

"Yes, all! He says his friends are against his marrying me because of father; and I gave him back his promise this afternoon, when we met at the copse gate. If he is so weak as to be prejudiced against me for no fault of mine, he does not love me so well as I thought; and I am too proud to enter any family where my own would be despised, so I said it was best we parted at once, since no good seemed to come of our keeping company."

"Then it was you broke it off, and not Tom?"

"It was, and it wasn't, mother. Tom's never been the same since old Ashtead picked father up drunk on the road from Brassington Fair, and there isn't one of the Ashteads who has looked civilly at me since. Every now and again Tom has told me the scornful things his sister Matty has said; and, after he told me last week of the quarrel they had at the farm about me, when his father said Ralph Birch was swallowing his uncle's acres so fast there would be nothing left for lad or lass—he repeated it as if the speech weighed on his mind."

"Well, Elizabeth," interrupted Mrs Birch soberly, "Farmer Ashtead was not far out. The land remains, but it is losing in value, and your father is swallowing the produce—you cannot blame him for speaking that which is so well known."

"No, mother," responded Elizabeth, looking steadfastly into the fire; "it was not so much what he said as the way he

said it! If I had taken it up then, I should have lost my temper, so I waited until I had thought it over. He said I was 'sullen,' and I let him think so; it was better than saying in anger what I should regret when cool. But all week I have thought it over, and when we met to-day I gave him his liberty. He seemed half ashamed, but he could not deny that he had changed, and was willing to be released. He cried, and said it was all through my father and his family, and that he should always love and respect me, and should never marry anyone else. And I had hard work to keep from crying too; but I knew I was doing right—and when I came home, mother, and saw father throw his cup and saucer at you, and strike you because you gave him tea without brandy, and heard his dreadful language, I was sure I had done right."

"Well, dear, I hope you have. We have all our burdens to bear, but God suits the back to the burden, and I trust He will enable you to bear yours with a brave

heart!" and tears rolled down the tender mother's cheeks.

"No fear, mother! but I must go away where I can see no scornful finger pointed at me as being jilted. But here comes Sarah," and she rose from her mother's feet to carry her bonnet and shawl upstairs, whilst her sister placed the newly-washed tea things in a cupboard by the chimney side, and asked, "What were you two talking about?"

The uncle of Ralph Birch had been a grazing farmer, and, never having married, had taken charge of his nephew from youth upwards, had encouraged him to marry, and at his death left him the farm and the cattle upon it.

Ralph's wife, when he married her, had been a lively little lass enough, but she toned down to quietude before three years had gone by. She was the younger of two sisters with whom Ralph had been shilly-shallying until, after a quarrel with the elder, he married Bess offhand to spite the other—a woman of strong will and

passions, who never forgave either him or her sister.

Married though he was, she resumed her influence over him. He began to twit his wife with her meekness and lack of spirit, and to declare openly that he had married the wrong woman. Not all at once this; two sons and two daughters were born to him before the uncle's death left him the possessor of farm and lands worth sixteen thousand pounds; free to deal with property or wife as he listed. Whether he had hitherto worn a mask to deceive his good uncle, or that the mere fact of being his own master removed the necessity for restraint, and overpowered his self-control, the result was the same.

He had frequently come home from fair or market the worse for liquor in his uncle's time, but the drovers sent on with the cattle could tell that he was sober enough whilst selling or buying, and that if he got more than was good for him it was at the house of his sister-in-law, then married to a publican named Hales, whose roadside

inn, "The Thirsty Traveller," was in his way to or from either Broomwood or Brassington.

Sarah, the youngest girl, was ten years of age when the old grazier died, and, prior to that deplorable event, the children had all been sent to good schools, Mrs Birch herself having had a fair education for a farmer's daughter of that period. But no sooner was old Birch laid in the grave, than Martha Hales began to insinuate that, unless they were meant to be fine gentlemen and ladies, it was quite time her nephews and nieces were taken from school, and set to work.

The suggestion fermented in Ralph's mind like yeast; he was quick to enunciate the doctrine at home, and to act up to it. In the case of Reuben, the eldest, then close on sixteen, Mrs Birch consented readily; but she did her best to obtain for the others also the advantages he had enjoyed.

It was useless. Before the year was out, thanks to Mrs Hales, Reuben and

James were both at work on the farm, and Elizabeth and Sarah helping their mother in-doors, to the best of their young ability, though little Sarah was more inclined for a romp on the green, than to sew a seam, polish furniture, or brush up the "house," as the large farm kitchen was called.

At the next hirings, the dairy-maid was dismissed, and the rough lass who did rubbing and scrubbing, and other odd jobs in-doors or out, was sent packing twelve months later; also on the inspiriting of Mrs Hales, whose opinion that "there was no more work than his wife and the girls could do if they would only bestir themselves," was openly quoted in justification of the measure.

He, however, did not repeat the hint she had given, that he "could go in and out when he pleased, and as he pleased, and do as he liked in his own house, if there was no one to watch, and listen, and tittle-tattle over all the village, if he so much as took a glass too much, or raised his hand to any of them."

And so long as he had any sensitiveness on the score of village gossip, Ralph Birch did feel the domestic's presence a restraint, in the matter of raising his hand both to his own lips and to other people's ears and shoulders; but he began to "do as he liked" pretty speedily when the "tattler" was gone.

He was not a niggard with his money any more than of his blows, however much he might preach economy; there was no want or scant on the farm, and he seldom called his wife to account for the money she made at market by the sale of her poultry, butter, and eggs. Indeed she had early occasion to deplore his unthrift; and the lavish way in which he would scatter his coin about when in liquor; and more than once remonstrated, in her quiet way, on the danger of opening his bag of gold at roadside inns, and then coming home with it in his pocket, scarcely able to guide or sit a horse.

He had done so on the occasion to which Elizabeth alluded, when the horse Mr Ash-

stead was driving shied at a heap of something in the road, which closer observation, and a ray of moonlight, showed to be a man. When the farmer flung the reins to his son, and leaped down, he discovered the man to be Ralph Birch, in a state of insensibility, the result not of the fall from his horse, but of his previous potations. Farmer Ashtead and his son hauled the senseless heap into their cart with no little disgust, and drove him to his own home, where they found the family in consternation at the return of the horse without his rider. But their disgust was intensified when his own sons lifted him from the cart, to carry him into the house, and he assailed them with curses and epithets to shock sober ears, having aroused just sufficiently to be abusive.

When the Ashteads got to their own farm there was a pretty tale to tell to the younger son, Tom, who had been courting Elizabeth Birch since the days they both wore pinafores. The tale lost nothing in the telling, and Tom felt uncomfortably that

the comments thereon were pointed at him. So, too, when it was supplemented by items of country gossip from time to time, and Tom's sisters began to sneer at his sweetheart as the daughter of such a father. At first he resented their ill-natured remarks, but in process of time the friction of the tongue wore away the edge of his resentment. He began to feel that it would not be desirable to have such a father-in-law as Ralph Birch, and more than once met Elizabeth in anything but an amiable frame of mind.

There is no question that he was attached to her; but he had not the firmness to resist the gibes of his brother—the lighter shafts of his sisters—and his temper fighting with his affection, was not improved in the process.

In some such mood he one day met Elizabeth, when—being questioned on his silence and coolness—he gave her pretty plainly to understand that he was being "persecuted" for her sake, and that he felt the hardship thereof. Her clear eyes saw

the struggle in his breast, she brought their afternoon walk to an abrupt termination, simply requesting him to give her a meeting at the copse gate the following Thursday.

They met when the birds were choosing their mates and twittering on the boughs among the fresh young verdure of spring; and there she told him gravely that it was best they should part.

Her quietude took him by surprise; he did not understand it.

"It is clear you do not love me, or you would not give me up so coolly," he cried, petulantly.

"It is because I *do* love you, Tom, that I give you back your word. I will never marry any man to bring shame or disgrace on him. It is clear your family would consider your connection with mine a disgrace; and I will never give your sisters the opportunity to point the finger of scorn at your wife—because—because of my father. I cannot avoid being his daughter, but I can save you from being called his son!"

He had not counted on this, and strove —though half-heartedly—to shake her resolution ; but she was firm.

Thereupon he took up the tone of one aggrieved, then shed tears, and they had at the last parted in anger—on his part at least.

Elizabeth had maintained her self-command until he had turned away with an angry jerk and a sharp—

"Then, be it so ; there are plenty of sweethearts to be found whose fathers are not flinging their fortunes into a beer barrel!"

But no sooner had he passed out of sight than her self-command gave way, and in agony almost insupportable her head dropped on the arm already resting on the gate, though still she shed no tears.

She had felt in honour bound to give him his freedom, to release him from his engagement since it brought him annoyance, and seemed to promise only bitterness for both. But in her heart of hearts she must have had a lurking hope that his

love was too deeply rooted to be uptorn by the censorious breath of gossip; that his sense of justice was too strong to condemn her for the failings of her father, and that his better nature would prevail against the sneers of his family.

She had come prepared to resign him, to argue the case against herself; to maintain her resolve unflinchingly, and do her duty towards him in spite of herself. But the ill-concealed satisfaction with which he took his release, the anger with which he affected to conceal it, gave her a terrible shock.

"What have I done to deserve this?" she said to herself. "He must have ceased to love me or he could never leave me thus, without even a parting kiss, or a clasp of the hand! It is all those sisters of his, I know. Well, perhaps it is for the best! Better the change should come before marriage than after; and I have really no right to blame Tom, since I gave him up of my own accord. But how could I help it. I could not keep him bound to me after all his

friends have said. Well, perhaps *it is* for the best. I must try to think so, and bear the separation as bravely as I can. But I must go away, where I shall neither see Tom nor father. I may keep my feelings to myself amongst strangers, and suffer less than at home, and perhaps father may behave better to mother when I am gone. At all events he will not be able to taunt her with my laziness. And if Tom should take another sweetheart, I should not have the pain of seeing it. No, no, I could not endure that; I must go away. It is altogether for the best."

So she communed with herself on her sad, slow, and solitary walk home that sweet spring afternoon, when nature and her heart were so little in accord. And the scene of violence she witnessed on her return to the farm only strengthened her resolution.

She expected opposition on the part of her father, and several days went by before she mustered courage to make known her intention. But he only looked at her

askance, and said, with a half sneer, "Service, indeed! What's put that into your head? Have you and Tom Ashstead fallen out? or has the lad found thy temper out, and turned thee off? Like enough! Well, if you're in such a hurry to turn out of a good home, you'd best be off, and good quittance to you!"

Had she a temper? Yes, if a spirit which rose against injustice, and was more ready to defend another than herself might be called a temper! She pressed her teeth and lips together as her father spoke, lest that "temper" should overmaster her judgment, and not a word said she in reply.

Out of the kitchen he stalked into the farmyard, where his eldest son was saddling a horse for his use. "I say, what's this fine megrim of Elizabeth's? Going to *service*, she says! I thought she came to say she was going to be wed! Going to service--ha! ha! ha! A likely lass for service! Let her try it! There's been a split, I reckon, atwixt her and Tom."

"Going to service, our Liz—never!"

was all the comment of Reuben, as he helped his father to mount, and held the gate open for him to ride after his drover and the cattle the man was driving before him. "He's been drinking already this morning," muttered the young man, "but his seat is steady enough now. It won't be to-night, if he stops at the 'Thirsty Traveller' on his way home. What was that he said about Liz? I say, Jim," to his brother, in a cowshed near, "have you heard aught about our Lizbeth and Tom? Father says they've fallen out; and she's for going to service."

"More like she can't stand his goings on at home," cried Jim. "If it hadn't been for poor mother, I should have run off and 'listed long ago."

"May be," mused Reuben, "but if I thought it was Tom—" and into the house he marched, leaving miry footprints on the clean red quarries as he went.

"I say, Liz, what's this I hear. You going to service? What does Tom think of it?"

The colour mounted to her brow, but she could not trust herself to speak.

"Has Tom jilted thee, Liz? If he has—" he gripped a muscular fist, and shook it in the face of an imaginary foe—"If he has, let him look out! I'll give him such a hiding he shall have sore bones for the rest of his days!"

"No, no, Reuben, it is not Tom's fault. It is I who have given him up—I—I—thought it best. Don't you say a word to Tom. It really was not Tom's doing."

She had much ado to convince him that she had discarded her lover, and that Tom was not to blame. She had no desire to make ill-blood between the two friends, and still less that Tom should be subjected to hard blows or hard words on her account.

"I want to earn my own living, and escape the contention at home," she at length admitted; and though Reuben was but half satisfied, he was bound to allow that her reason was sufficient.

"But what says mother?" he asked.

"She thinks I am in the right." So there was no more to be said.

There was, however, more to be done, if Elizabeth's project was to be carried out. Her wardrobe had to be overhauled and adapted, and the advertising columns of the various papers brought home from Brassington market by her father had to be scrutinised and studied.

Many were the servants seeking places, many the mistresses lacking maids; but anxious as was Elizabeth to escape from the village, where it was already bruited about that Tom Ashstead had jilted her, and where she ran the risk of meeting him at church, or in her errands abroad, anxious as she was to escape her father's taunts, her brother's questioning glances, she was not sufficiently dependent or reckless to take a situation at random.

Once or twice she saw that which seemed promising, but her letters were unnoticed, or the advertisers required young women who had already been in service, and who could furnish credentials from former mis-

tresses. She began to think the search for a situation a more tedious task than she had dreamed. She was on the point of going over to a register office in Brassington, when her eye was attracted by the following in the *Brassington Gazette* :—

WANTED, for a small family, a respectable young Woman as domestic Servant, where another is kept ; plain cooking required ; washing put out ; work light ; wages liberal.—Reply by letter to C. P., Laburnum Villa, West Lane.

This seemed promising. Elizabeth showed the advertisement to her mother.

"Well, my dear," said she, with a sigh, "if you must leave home for servitude, I think you cannot do better than answer that. It seems the very place for you. The advertiser must be respectable ; and if the family be small, a second servant must make the work light, and be a companion for you at the same time."

So Elizabeth wrote, and in due time came a reply :—

"Mrs Price is satisfied with the statement of Elizabeth Birch's qualifications, and the testimony of the clergyman's lady, but, before making a decision, would be glad to see the young woman. Will be at liberty on Wednesday, from 2 to 4 P.M. If her mother bore her company, it might be more satisfactory, Elizabeth Birch not having been in service previously."

Elizabeth was ironing when the letter came. She took her time; finished the garment she was smoothing; hung it on the clothes'-horse to air; placed the cool iron with its fellows in front of the fire to get hot, and then went into the dairy to her mother.

"What do you think of that?" she asked, laying the letter before her.

Mrs Birch was weighing butter ready for the mould. Laying down her knife, she took up the letter, but with a trembling hand—this going away of her girl would be a sore trial to her. A tear gathered in her eye as she said,—

"I think the lady is very cautious. Perhaps she wishes to be sure we are respectable. Yes; I will go with you, Elizabeth."

"What's that?" cried Sarah, as she came into the dairy with a frothing pail of new milk. "Price—oh! is that the name? You don't seem to rejoice over it, Elizabeth. I only wish the chance was mine."

"I do not see any sufficient cause for rejoicing as yet," was Elizabeth's answer. "Mrs Price says nothing decided; and I think it is somewhat inconsiderate to ask my *mother* to leave her own work, and travel fourteen miles and back, as well as myself, for her inspection. It is, of course, requisite that she should see me; but I think mother might have been spared both the cost and trouble of a fatiguing and unnecessary journey. If I desire to go into service, there is no reason mother should be put to inconvenience, or be annoyed by strangers. I feel tempted to decline."

"Nay, my dear," said Mrs Birch, "it is a very important step you are taking, and I should myself like to see what sort of a

person this Mrs Price is before you engage with her, since you are set on leaving home. She may have no knowledge of farm life, or any idea that I must neglect duties here to accompany you. We can go in the spring-cart. It will be better than walking to Broomwood to meet the coach. We can go to-morrow, and be back before your father gets home."

It was a long drive for Mrs Birch, who seldom stirred beyond the farm, except to church or the Broomwood market, three miles away. Elizabeth had taken the reins. Horse and cart were left at the "Black Boy," when they reached the busy town. They had then a stiff walk before them, past the old church, across the market-place, from which a narrow and crowded street of shops led to a wide open thoroughfare, ascending, still ascending, until, more than a mile beyond, the shops disappeared, the remains of a fine old park appeared on the left, and the houses on the right interposed a wall of evergreens between pedestrians and their lower windows. As

they ascended, still ascended, the road branched off. West Lane opening out to the left a vista of small villa residences embowered among trees, in the freshest green of spring. Lilac and hawthorn scented the air; laburnums shook their golden tresses overhead; the noise and smoke of the manufacturing town were left behind, they had risen to a purer atmosphere, when they rang the bell at Laburnam Villa, and were asked by a neat serving-maid to step into the front room.

They had ample time to note the glitter of glass and gilding; of polished walnut-wood and bright steel: the colour and devices of upholstery and carpeting, when Mrs Price sailed in, with a train of silk behind her, and bade them to be re-seated on the sofa, whence they had risen, and where the light from two windows fell upon them, whilst she, in an easy chair, confronted them, herself in the shade.

She was, by turns, all affability and all stiffness. Put a number of questions, some of them irrelevant; expressed her-

self satisfied with their replies; announced her objection to give more than ten pounds a-year to a new hand; her liberal advance if Elizabeth suited and remained with them. Mr Price was from home all day, so work was light; washing went out; the maids between them merely "rubbed out" a few dusters and their own clothes. Pastry, and all special cooking, passed through her own hands. They kept little company and early hours, gave the usual holidays, but allowed no followers; for that reason preferred a girl from the country. The maid she had then came from the country, and was very respectable.

All this sounded well. Mrs Price and Mrs Birch appeared mutually satisfied; and if Elizabeth had any doubts, she did not express them. It was settled that she should enter the place the following Monday. And then Mrs Birch and her daughter returned to the inn, where the cart awaited them, tired and hungry after their long walk. Mrs Price had not thought it necessary to offer any refresh-

ment, although conscious they must have been hours upon the road.

Though within sight of the village, Birch Farm lay among fields, and was approached by a narrow lane between high hedges of thorn and bramble.

There were gates for the cattle to leave the pasturage ; stiles for bipeds—the said stiles in that part of the world being merely a succession of horizontal bars between upright posts, excessively inconvenient for petticoats. Skirting the main road, a patch of copse-wood ran two-thirds the length of the pasturage, a low wooden gate with a hasp, and a railed fence alone keeping out intruders. This gate opened from the pasturage, and although in proximity to the stile, was hidden from the lane by the height and closeness of the picturesque hedge.

It was not the nearest way from church, but Elizabeth had been wont to choose it, possibly because there was a someone ready to hand her over the stile.

That last Sunday, at church or home,

she took the wonted path—took it alone —partly from habit, partly from a melancholy desire to say farewell to a hallowed spot—the birthplace and the burial-place of her young love.

Tom had not been at church. She fancied he had heard she was going away, and could not face her. She had mounted the high stile, and was poising herself to cross the top bar, when her eye caught the figure of Tom Ashtead waiting behind the copse-gate. She lost her balance, her dress caught, and she fell. Thanks to Tom's promptitude, and the strength of her dress, he caught her before she reached the trodden ground, and she escaped with a rent skirt and a severe shaking. Her heart fluttered; her colour came and went; her limbs trembled, and refused to uphold her; but she set it down to the fall, and said she should soon be better.

When she disengaged herself from his arm, she had to cling to the little gate-post for support, unable to move a step.

He came, Tom said, to say good-bye to her, if she was going, as he had heard, and to wish her well, and to say he honoured her for her decision; that wherever she was, his heart would go with her; and he hoped she would, at least, shake hands with him, and part friends.

Without a word, for speech was impossible, she put forth her hand. He took it, and, more, he caught her in his arms; held her in a close embrace; pressed a long kiss upon her lips; released her—and was gone!

CHAPTER II.

FIRST SERVICE.

"WHY, Lizzy, how you have torn the skirt of your dress! And that beautiful lilac muslin, too! However did you contrive to do it?"

So saying, Sarah, who had walked straight home from church with Reuben, and already had her Sunday gown tucked up and an apron before her, held out her sister's dilapidated skirt to its full width, as if to show the extent of the damage.

"I slipped as I was getting over the stile," answered Elizabeth, as composedly as she could; but there was something in

her voice which caused Sarah to look sharply up in her face for the flush she knew to be there.

This was in the back kitchen, and before she could drop the expanded skirt, or utter more than an ejaculatory "Oh-h!" the father came on the scene behind her.

"Well; thou'rt in a nice pickle! A pretty mess for a decent girl just come home from church! Where'st tha been?"

And he took her by the shoulder and shook her roughly.

"I fell over the stile and tore it," she answered, with quiet firmness; all her strength of will having come to her aid.

"Fell over th' stile, indeed!" he echoed, with a scornful sneer. "When didst fall o'er th' stile afore, I'd like to know, and be hanged to thee? Thou looks as if thou'dst been dragged through a thorn bush. I reckon this comes o' meeting Tom Birch in th' copse! And look at thy cape! It's well thou'rt going away, or thou'd have all Kitknoll talking of thee. An' who's to

buy thee fine clothes to be torn to rags, I'd like to know?"

There was an expansion of the girl's nostrils, a firm compression of lips and teeth before she answered, coldly,—

"I am going where fine clothes will be out of place, and where I shall earn my own."

"It's time thou did'st!" he bawled after her. "And see you don't go larking with lads in thy new place, or thou'll not keep it long."

Sarah had disappeared at the first sound of her father's voice. She had whispered to her mother what was the matter, and finished laying the cloth with signs on her own face of a desire to tackle her father in his own style. Leaving her mother to dish up the dinner, she followed Elizabeth upstairs, and said as much to her, running off at a tangent to add,—

"What did you mean by not wanting fine clothes where you were going? and what shall you do with the one you are taking off, and your other muslins?"

"I mean that they are unfit for a servant. I could not use my mistress's time and starch to get them up, if I could wear them. I'll leave them behind for you."

"For me! Oh, Lizzy, that *is* good of you! But surely you don't mean to dress like a Quaker or a charity girl when you are in service?"

And Sarah looked as if the prospect was doleful.

"Certainly not; I can be plain and respectable without being either prim or outlandish."

Sarah did not see it; she broke out on another tack.

"I say, wasn't father cruel? But did you meet Tom?"

"Yes; it was through the surprise of seeing him that I fell. Tom caught me. Hark! father's calling. We must not keep him waiting."

And she hurried her sister off, fastening her own changed dress as she followed down the stairs, her conflict of feeling kept well out of sight. If that unexpected

meeting with Tom and his parting embrace had unnerved her for the time, there could be no doubt that it had given her strength and consolation ; but it did not change her purpose.

To say that Reuben was up betimes would be to state that which was a fact all the year round. But he was up earlier than usual, and Jim was up with him to get the cattle into the pasture, and the cows milked before the girls were astir.

"You know, lad," he had said to sleepy Jim, "it wont be fair to expect Elizabeth to sit down and milk before she starts ; and I want to have the horse harnessed, and the cart out, and her box in it—ay, and to drive her off before father's about, or he may turn crusty and not let us have the horse and cart. And, besides, Jim, there'll be one hand short on the farm now; we shall have to be up with the lark if we would keep things right and straight. Father's not much good now."

"No ; more's the pity. I've a notion he was at the 'Thirsty Travellers' last night,

from the look of the house-place this morning. You may drive to Broomwood and back before he's up, if you're sharp."

And so Reuben did, and had the horse rubbed down before his father was up and about. And the only remark the latter made, as he looked round, when he did put in an appearance, was—"Well, I reckon she's off! An' thou's no need to spill any eyewater over it. It's her own seeking, and there's one less in the way here. Where's the brandy? I'm all in a shake with the cold. Stir thee!"

The red-eyed wife he addressed, not daring to refuse the evil spirit which had robbed him of his vital heat and put him in a tremor, obeyed in timorous haste.

"I'm glad Elizabeth got off so quietly," remarked the mother, with a sigh, to Sarah, when he had "pulled himself together" and was gone.

It was premature gladness, so far as those at home were concerned; for Mrs Hales, happening to open the shutters at the "Thirsty Travellers" as they passed, saw

Reuben driving his sister and her box towards Broomwood in the spring-cart, and did not fail to make the most of her observation when Ralph Birch stopped his horse at the door the next morning on *his* way to Broomwood, and called for a stiff glass to "help a fellow to market and keep off the chills."

She was not the best of aunts by any means; was one to shun rather than to seek, and she knew it; but she professed to consider herself slighted and aggrieved at their passing the door without so much as a "How d'ye do?" or a "Good-bye!"

There was a second call at the inn on Ralph's way home, and there was a scene when he got there; Reuben, wakened out of his sleep, having to rush downstairs, barefooted and coatless, to protect his mother from the violence of the infuriated father, and wrest his horsewhip from him.

Nothing knew Elizabeth of this. She was too early for the coach, and Reuben could not stay with her. A shake of the hand—a brotherly kiss—a "God be with

you ;"—the cart was speeding back again, and she, seated on her box, with a composed face, waited the coming of the coach, which was to whirl her away from all she knew and all she loved.

"I must look forward, and not back. It is my own act, and it is all for the best," she thought to herself, as she set her teeth resolutely together, and choked emotion down.

The journey that fresh spring morning through village streets, where half-dressed children stood at cottage doors to watch them pass, along highways bordered with verdure and hedgerows full of bloom and melody, under over-arching boughs touched with the tender green of opening leaves, with the perfume of hawthorn and lilac, and less obtrusive florets floating in the air, must have been delightful had she not lived in the country all her life, and had her mind filled with other things.

She smelled the town before she reached it ; and, if anything, Brassington looked more dingy on the second visit than on the

first. But once set down at the "Black Boy," and thrown on her own resources, she had to think and act for herself. There was no hiring a man to carry a box so far, had she felt disposed to walk. An ostler, for a fee, undertook to procure a cab, and told her the honest fare.

Calm as she looked when her box was put down at Laburnum Villa, her heart beat rapidly. The neat maid she had seen before opened the door for her, helped her to lift the box on to the mat into the passage, with a caution not to graze the paint or rest it on the oilcloth, tapped at the door of a back room, and announced,—

"The new servant, m'm."

A voice said stiffly, "Tell Elizabeth Birch to come here;" and her servitude had begun.

Mrs Price, in a much-befrilled morning dress, sat on a rocking-chair, with a child about six months old upon her lap. This was the first intimation to Elizabeth that children were included in the small family, and she said so.

"I was not aware there was a child, madam, when I engaged," she observed, respectfully.

"Perhaps not. As you will have nothing to do with them or the nursery, I did not think it worth mentioning," was the complacent reply.

"Elizabeth wondered how many children the "them" represented. She only drew in her breath and faintly murmured, "Oh!"

"With the exception of the nursery, which is the nurse's department, and the dusting of the drawing-room ornaments (with which I never allow a *servant* to meddle), you will have the entire housework in your charge, and the meals; but we have only very plain cookery, and anything extra I superintend myself."

Elizabeth began to wonder if she had not unwittingly undertaken more than she could accomplish.

The lady went on,—

"We keep very little company; but, at all times, I require everything done

with extreme nicety, for I am *very* particular."

"I thought, madam, there was a second servant kept?" put in Elizabeth at length.

"Oh, yes; but Ann is the *nurse*-maid; she only assists to get through the little washing done at home. And now you may go. Ann will help you to carry your box to your room, and show you where everything for your use is kept. Stay—you are an early riser, I understand; so much the better. This room, and the hall, and steps must be done up thoroughly before breakfast; and, as Mr Price goes to business, breakfast must be on the table precisely at eight o'clock."

"Very well, ma'am;" and she again essayed to go. She was again recalled.

"By-the-bye—your name; it is too long for a domestic; we shall shorten it to Bessy."

Mrs Price stretched out her hand to the bell; the door opened.

"Ann, help Bessy to carry her box up-stairs, and then come back for baby."

And Bessy followed Ann, not quite sure whether she was herself or someone else. However, she determined to do her best, and see what would come of it.

It was a long haul upstairs of the heavy box to the attic where Elizabeth, or "Bessy," was to sleep; but barely had the girls set it down and paused to take breath than the ting-tang of the bell resounded through the house.

"Oh, dear, there's missis ringing. I must be off for that baby. You can find your way to the kitchen, I daresay; it's at the back."

And good-natured Ann stopped at the door.

"I daresay you are hungry?"

"Yes; I have had nothing since breakfast at half-past five."

"And I suppose missis never asked you if you wanted anything?"

Bessy shook her head.

"Just like her. I shall ask for you."

There was a fall and a scream from the room below.

"Good gracious! what are them three little pickles up to now?" cried Ann, as she was off downstairs with a rush; and Bessy was left behind to reflect on the rapid multiplication of the "*small* family," and on the "three little pickles" roaring and stamping in the nursery beneath. She had not been used to children. Many years had gone by since Sarah had been a child, and then she was but a child herself; and now she was more than eighteen, and Sarah close upon seventeen. She felt that she had been wilfully misled, and wondered how she should get on with them if they were rude; but her determination to do *her* duty was unshaken.

She looked out of the dormer window on a longer suburban garden than ordinary, and on fruit trees which must have been there before the villa was built.

"I'm glad there is a garden, and a promise of plenty of fruit; and the 'little pickles' can scarcely make such a disturbance as father."

And so thinking, having washed her face

and smoothed her banded hair, she put on a clean apron and went downstairs, as comely, neat, and modest-looking a servant-maid as one would wish to see; well-disposed to make the best of everything.

The hubbub upstairs had subsided. Mrs Price was in the kitchen, with a small plate in her hand. She stopped on her way to the pantry, eyed Bessy from top to toe, and then asked, in a tone of anything but satisfaction,—

"Have you no caps?"

"Caps? No," faltered Bessy, wondering what there was criminal in the want of a cap. "I did not know they were necessary, ma'am; only the old women wear caps at Kitknoll."

"Every *respectable* servant-maid wears a cap in Brassington," said Mrs Price, with pointed emphasis. "I cannot permit a servant of *mine* to be seen without one. You cannot possibly go to the door without a cap. You might be taken for a friend of the family!"

"Would that be such an enormity?" thought Bessy.

"Perhaps Ann will lend you one of hers for to-day," her mistress went on; "in the evening, when the children are all in bed, she can take you to a shop where such things are sold."

"Very well, ma'am."

The lady disappeared into the pantry, an offshoot of the kitchen, and laid on the deal table the blue plate, on which lay quite an inoffensive piece of cheese.

"I am told you breakfasted early; you can have that for your luncheon; there is bread in the pantry, and I will draw you a glass of table-beer; though I do not usually allow luncheon, as we dine at one o'clock."

"I do not drink beer," said Bessy gravely.

Mrs Price lifted her eyebrows, looked at her, put the brass tap-key back in her pocket, with a composed, "So much the better;" but whether she meant for the girl's health or her own pocket is not very clear.

There was to be cold meat for dinner; she would find potatoes in a basket in the brewhouse, where they must be peeled, and where she would find sauce-pans. Ann would be down presently, and could show her where other things were kept.

And presently Ann did come down, with the baby in her arms, and three boys at her heels, the eldest scarcely six. They came crowding round the new maid, at first to stare, then to question, and, as she left the brewhouse with the saucepan of potatoes in her hand, followed pell-mell, struggling which should be foremost; heedless of Ann's remonstrance, and in the struggle to escape from her grasp, Augustus pushed against Damian, and Damian upset Reginald, who fell right in front of Bessy on the hearth, clutching at her dress, and causing her to stumble, and shake a quantity of the cold water out over the bright fender, the hearthstone, and Master Regy's blue frock.

Ann plucked the child away with her disengaged hand. He set up a roar.

"If I don't tell mamma the new servant's gone and knocked Regy down, first thing! Oh! and spilled all the water on Regy's new frock and the fender," cried six years' Augustus, lifting up his hands, and setting off at a run.

"You little villain, you'd best not," interposed Ann, dragging him back with a shake; "*you* did it. Hush, Regy; you're not hurt."

By this time mamma was on the scene. One said one thing—one another. Bessy held her tongue; had she broken silence, she might have lost her temper. Regy had bruised his forehead, his frock was wet, so were fender and hearth, and Bessy was silent,—all conclusive evidence to Mrs Price.

"Facts are stubborn things," said she, pointing to these, ignoring the fact that Bessy's apron hung from one string, and her skirt from the gathers. "You will have to be more careful and good-tempered with the children, young woman, if you are to remain here," and having said this, with pointed severity, to Bessy, she took the whimpering little one by the hand,

saying, coaxingly, "Come with me, Regy dear, and have a cake to make him well."

"There, I told you," chuckled Augustus, as he, too, ran off to beg a cake, with Damian after him.

"Are they always so boisterous?" asked Bessy, as she pinned up her apron and torn skirt, and Ann hushed the disturbed baby in her arms.

"We—ll, not *always;*" and the emphasis was eloquent.

Between housewifely instinct, and the opening of this cupboard and that drawer by Ann, to reveal where this thing or that was placed, Bessy had collected the table equipments on a tray, and was at the oven testing the progress of a rice pudding, when a passing figure darkened the window, and Ann exclaimed,—

"Why, if here isn't Clara home from school."

"Another," thought Bessy; "where is the small family to end?"

It did not end with the miss who burst

in at the kitchen door, and flung down her books with the exclamation,—

"Dinner not ready? Oh dear, and I shall be kept waiting!"

She did not wait long. She and Master Augustus dined in state with their mamma, the younger ones in the nursery. Before the cold meat was removed, Mrs Price rang for two plates. On these she laid, with nice calculation, the thin slices of beef designed for the domestics. Bessy took it without comment; but she thought, "It's well I've a small appetite; what would Sarah do with such a dinner?" And she could not help saying to the nurse-maid,—"Will that be sufficient for you?"

"I suppose I must make it do, and fill up with potatoes. I've been in places where one hadn't a chance of even doing that; so I've learned to take what I get *here*, and be thankful. And I've been where they give you only the leavings in the pot for tea; but Mrs Price does give you a spoonful of tea for yourself; so it's not the worst place in the world."

To Bessy, accustomed to the abundance of the farm, this was a new aspect of service, and not a pleasant one; but she had left home resolved to make light of difficulties, and was not to be daunted.

Her initiation was not over. At nine o'clock, the last instalment of the "small family" let himself in at the front door with a latch-key, and in a few moments the bell rang, and Bessy was summoned into the parlour for Mr Price's inspection and approval. He was a short, fussy man, with sandy hair and whiskers, and stood on the hearthrug with his legs apart, his hands under his coat tails, and his back to the grate, where a fire was not.

"Oh! so this is Bessy Birch, is she?" and he smiled and nodded, as if to signify that her appearance was satisfactory. "I hope that you left all well at home, Bessy; and that you have no sweethearts or followers. We are very particular, Bessy, and could not allow anything of *that* kind. Very particular. And, Bessy, I must have my shaving-water precisely at twenty

minutes past seven, to a *second;* so don't forget. And breakfast on the table—eggs boiled, bacon frizzled—at eight to a minute, or I shall miss my omnibus. You understand—to a *minute.* I am *very* particular."

Bessy curtsied her acquiescence, and was allowed to depart. But at ten, when she was removing the supper things, Mrs Price said, "You had better go to bed in half-an-hour, as you will have to be up at four for the washing; Ann also."

She laid her head on her pillow in a sort of whirl. In twelve hours she had discovered the fallacy of trusting an advertisement. Her first day of service was not promising.

"A small family"—five obstreperous children; the "other servant"—a nursemaid to keep them in order; "washing put out"—an order to be at the wash-tub by four in the morning. What fresh discoveries might she not make in twelve months? Then the scrutiny and observations of Mr Price had roused a spirit of rebellion in her breast, which took her

quite an hour to quell. But she only grew the more determined to pursue the path she had chosen, and to do her duty in it. Perhaps some pride mingled with this resolve; a pride that would not confess itself mistaken. And be sure, Tom, and the folk at home were not absent from her kaleidoscope, but helped to drive away sleep until close upon midnight.

From four until twenty minutes past seven Ann stood at the wash-tub with her, and entertained her with items of her own history and of those with whom she had lived; and certainly she took the bloom off Elizabeth Birch's peach. But when the shaving-water went up to her master, she had to prepare to bathe and dress five children for their breakfast at half-past eight.

Bessy, too, had her kitchen to sweep, the room and breakfast to prepare, her own hurried meal to take, things to clear away, beds to make, and, though Mrs Price professed to lend a hand in dusting and other little matters because it was washing day, when Bessy got back into

the wash-house (there called a brew-house) the water in use was cold, and had she not previously popped in from time to time to keep the furnace alight, she might have had none to renew it. In the course of the morning a laundress came "for the washing"—the master's linen, the lady's and baby's muslins; but, although these *were* put out, Bessy found that washing for a "very particular" family, in which were five children, was no trifle, and when she sat down to her tea her arms ached with pounding at the maiding-tub, rubbing, and wringing.

But she was not afraid of work, and was not inclined to give in, though she could not forget that she had been deceived, and she was wise enough to feel that activity was an antidote to melancholy. She had her hours of bitterness, into which none might enter; but she battled right valiantly with her own weakness, and no one there was the wiser. And so the weeks and the months went by; she had brought her work under by system and routine; was

ready at times to lend a helping hand to flurried Ann, when the fractiousness of one or other of the children made it almost impossible to dress them for a walk. Strangely enough, she had acquired an influence over the turbulent youngsters, neither possessed by the mother nor by Ann. At the very first she saw that she must be firm and decided with them, and permit no wild invasions of her territory, or there would be neither rest nor possibility of pursuing her work satisfactorily. Yet she was anything but unkind to them, she was simply staid and equable, her yea was yea, and her nay was nay.

More than three weeks elapsed before she wrote home, and then she said nothing of her mistress's niggardliness, or her master's fussiness, or the children's rudeness; she merely said there was a larger family and more work than she had anticipated, but that the work was good for her, and she had found a very sensible companion in the nurse-maid, and was not so lonely as might have been expected.

It was answered, not by her mother, but by Reuben, and that not on paper, but in person.

He had come to Brassington market instead of his father, who had been thrown off his horse as he was mounting at the door of "The Thirsty Travellers," and lay there unfit to be moved, or so their Aunt Hailes said. And it came out that Reuben had "pitched into Tom Ashstead" for spreading discreditable reports over the village about the last meeting they had in the copse, when her dress was torn, and that Tom and he had a "regular stand-up fight," and Tom got the worst of it. And it turned out that it was her Aunt Hailes, after all, who had set the infamous slander afloat, and she could only have got the lying foundation from his father. He had ferreted it out; but not before it had made ill blood between him and Tom. However, he didn't much mind, for he thought Tom richly deserved a good hiding for sneaking out of his engagement to her, after courting so long.

Reuben had not stayed more than half-an-hour, but no sooner had he gone, than a sharp ring of the parlour bell summoned Bessy into the presence of Mrs Price.

"Who was that?" demanded she, with stiff asperity.

"My eldest brother, ma'am."

"Did I not say that I allowed no followers? I may overlook it *this* time, but remember it for the future. I am *very* particular. No followers."

In the heartache Reuben had left behind, in the consciousness that her good name had been aspersed by those who should have been her shield, she hardly felt the minor reproof of her mistress; but she did feel, and sorely, the added insinuation of her master, when he came home at night, that he *might* be her brother and he might *not*, but that it would not do for them to have strange men about the place; not that they doubted her propriety or the young man's honesty; but it *did not* do, and they could not tolerate followers.

It was at her tongue's end to give her

fussy master warning there and then, but Bessy seldom acted upon impulse; she set her teeth in front of the rebellious tongue, and came to the conclusion she could only live down slander by keeping in the place she had entered.

"Is that girl sullen, or what?" asked Mr Price of his better half, before she was fairly out of the room. "The silence in which she receives reproof is something incomprehensible."

"Sullen, I should say," was the verdict of the lady, who elevated her shoulders and curled her lip, as she came to that conclusion. "She scarcely condescended to reply to *me* when I spoke to her."

Nevertheless Mrs Price found that the domestic wheels moved more smoothly with her reticent maid than had previously been the case, and though she felt it her duty to be particular, and to have rooms re-swept and dusted if they were not done to her satisfaction, and Bessy's silent obedience was disconcerting, still it was obedi ence, and she had the scolding to herself.

She had the fruit also to herself when it ripened. It was made into pies and preserves, given to the children, placed on the table for dessert on the Sunday when Mr Price was at home, but not shared with the domestics; and Ann gave Bessy a hint that the very gooseberries and currants were counted on the trees. Apples and pears were stowed away, and were absolutely allowed to rot in the store-room, but never a one found its way to a servant, except as a small fraction of a tart.

To Bessy, who had gathered and eaten fruit at will, this niggardliness was something shocking. She was, however, both too proud and too honest to stretch her hand to that which was forbidden.

"Mistress has certainly a right to do what she likes with her own," she remarked to Ann one day, when she had been sent with a large basket of decayed fruit to the mixen, "but it is a sin and a shame to let God's good gifts go to waste and destruction for want of using."

"So it is," said Ann, "but I am not so sure they are her *own*, any more than the talent the man hid in a napkin. But don't you mean to sit down and finish your dinner? You eat nothing; and it will be quite cold."

"My dinner was finished for me when I was called from it into the store-room, to wait whilst a peck or two of rotten apples were picked out and thrown into the clothes-basket, to be carried out of doors. When mistress does not cut off our meat until she has finished her own dinner, ours cannot be very warm to begin with; and, after being so called off, *I* cannot go back to the uneatable slice of chilled mutton."

"Ah, Bessy, you are more nice than wise; if you had been in service as long as me—"

"But I have *not*," interrupted Bessy; "I have been accustomed to warm and comfortable meals, and time to eat them in without jumping up every few minutes. However, if that is a condition of service,

I must e'en make the best of it ; there are worse things than spoiled dinners," and, with a heavy sigh, she collected her plates and dishes for washing.

It will be seen that Bessy was gathering her impressions of service under anything but favourable auspices ; Ann's precedents were not rose-leaved or rose-tinted, and the former had early discovered that Mrs Price was one of those who would exact everything, but render nothing in return beyond the bare pound of flesh compulsory—one not likely to bind her domestics in any bonds but those of hire. With the approach of winter she learned a little more of Mrs Price's consideration for "those of her own household," and had, besides, an unpleasant surprise in a letter from Birch Farm.

END OF VOL. II.

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